



## In-Between Mobility and Immobility: Gradual Transformation of the Nomad Fishers of Bangladesh to Sedentary Lifestyle

Muhammad Shifuddin Mahmud<sup>1</sup>, Amith Dutta<sup>2\*</sup>, Ayrin Ahmed<sup>3</sup>, Jahedul Haque<sup>4</sup>, Md. Ashis Mawla<sup>1</sup>, MdAlamgir Hossain<sup>1</sup>, RashedulHaque Shadhin<sup>5</sup>, MdSaiful Islam<sup>6</sup>, Raf Ana Rabbi Shawon<sup>7</sup>, Md. Hashibur Rahman<sup>8</sup>, Habib Mohammad Ali<sup>9</sup>, Atiqur Rahman Sunny<sup>10\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Center for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS), Dhaka, Bangladesh

<sup>2</sup>Department of Anthropology, Comilla University, Bangladesh

<sup>3</sup>School of Social Science, Humanities and Languages, Bangladesh Open University, Bangladesh

<sup>4</sup>Department of Anthropology, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh

<sup>5</sup>Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), Dhaka, Bangladesh

<sup>6</sup>Department of Fisheries, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh

<sup>7</sup>Laboratory of Wildlife Resources, Gifu University, Japan

<sup>8</sup>Bangladesh Fisheries Research Institute, Headquarters, Mymensingh, Bangladesh

<sup>9</sup>Department of Media Studies and Journalism, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), Bangladesh

<sup>10</sup>Pathfinder Research and Consultancy Center, Bangladesh

\*Corresponding author: [atikunny@yahoo.com](mailto:atikunny@yahoo.com), [amith.anp@cou.ac.bd](mailto:amith.anp@cou.ac.bd)

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received: Aug. 14, 2024

Accepted: Sept. 21, 2024

Online: Sep. 27, 2024

#### Keywords:

Bede,

Neoliberal economy,

Mobility and immobility,

Sedentary living,

Bangladesh

### ABSTRACT

This study explored the complex development of identity and lifestyle among the nomadic river gypsies, known as the Bede, in Bangladesh. Methodologically, a comprehensive strategy combining primary and secondary data sources was employed to examine the sociodemographic profile of nomadic fishers. Traditionally, these fishermen depend on water-based enterprises such as fishing, magic shows, and serpent charms, displaying distinctive socio-cultural behaviors and engaging in various economic activities. However, the demands of the contemporary neoliberal economy increasingly conflict with their ancient practices. Their temporal and spatial lives are also undergoing rapid changes due to environmental shifts, institutional neglect, and social stigma associated with being perceived as unclean or as outsiders. This uncertain transition significantly influences their decisions regarding migration. The paper delves into the factors affecting migration decisions among marginalized communities, focusing on the cultural dynamics and adaptability of nomadic fishermen.

### INTRODUCTION

The 'Bede', a gypsy-like clan in Bangladesh, survives by traveling on water and roaming the land. In practical, this group has no territorial attachments (Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2018). Rather, they stay on public or private land while traveling for small-scale commercial purposes (Alam *et al.*, 2023a). The typical notion of Bede's 'continuous mobility' is prevalent in popular and academic discourse (Islam, 2018; Mahmud *et al.*, 2024). Bede has historically been associated with a romantic notion of nomadic metaphysics in which 'mobility is natural and an essential quality of human beings'. Our early memories also support this concept of mobility. However, our research has shown a different reality, the Bede's slow transition to a sedentary

existence as they reject their ancient, century-old way of life (**Drinkwater *et al.*, 2010; Kuddus *et al.*, 2021**). This steady transition motivates us to investigate the 'mobility' idea, as John Urry, Mimi Sheller, and others have done by pointing out 'when and why do people opt to move or not move, under varied pressures and conditions' (**Maksud & Rasul, 2006; Jentoft, 2007**). According to them, 'immobility' is an essential component of mobility. As a result, this technique aids in the exploration of processes and pressures that weaken the Bede community's identity.

Moving forward in this piece, it is worth noting that for many Bede, their traditional mode of transportation through waterways is giving place to road networks. Similarly, their main economic activities include serpent charm, minor trading, and healing have become obsolete in the modern neoliberal economy (**Jentoft *et al.*, 2011; Kuddus *et al.*, 2020**). As a result, many have abandoned their traditional way of life in favor of alternate occupations, as well as current cultural characteristics. Continuous interaction with neighbors from dominant ethnic groups (Bengali) has taught them to value material well-being (**Alam *et al.*, 2023b**). Furthermore, the widespread social stigma of 'dirty' and 'impure' connected to the Bede (**Das, 2013; Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2017**) causes the dominant Bengali Muslim population to reject them as 'normal'. This intensifies their desire for transformation. Sedentarism philosophy connotes geographical attachment or identity (**Bari *et al.*, 2023; Rana *et al.*, 2023; Mahmud *et al.*, 2024**), but the state frequently fails to recognize or provide identification to the Bede, denying them civil rights. The cumulative impacts of all of this have caused a significant psychological shift in them, pushing them to modify their lifestyle, embrace modern materialism, and eventually adopt a sedentary lifestyle (**Islam *et al.*, 2018a; Chakma *et al.*, 2022**).

Nonetheless, this change is difficult since a considerable number of people still hold onto their ancestral roots, take pride in their cultural heritage, and actively try to preserve their unique rituals and language (**Rahman *et al.*, 2002; Islam, 2011**). However, the persistence of deep ethnic differences and social shame prevents them from fully integrating into the Bengali population. When questioned about their main difficulty, the Bede repeatedly mention their struggle with identification (**Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2017**). As this study reveals, they face an ambiguous 'in-between' situation : traveling (for the purpose of gawal) or traveling less, preserving their own cultural heritage or imitating modern culture, adhering to their own clientele's political system (patronage system) or participating in modern democratic elections, etc. (**Islam *et al.*, 2016; Kuddus *et al.*, 2022**). As a result, the study's research concentrates on the binary decision of mobility or immobility, and discovers an 'intersecting space' or duality between them. This contradiction encourages the Bede to dream of their ancestral identity and occupation while accepting the influence of changing circumstances that lead to a gradual transition to sedentary living.

Following a brief description of the Bede people, this article examined their conceptual framework and methodological considerations. The following segment examines changes in economic activities, means of subsistence, and sociopolitical existence and position. In the final portion, theoretical comprehension is linked to field findings to reach a conclusion.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 1. Location of the study

The study follows ethnographic approach, in which the study team visited the Bedes at Holdiya, gaolimanfda, louhojong & srinagar under the Munshiganj district. Access to Bede village was not easy, since the Bede people being exposed to local level social vulnerability, and they do not trust outsiders easily. While immersing into the Bede village, the study team experienced attacking questions from the Bedes, especially young male members who were involved in rural politics and unlawful activities. Tackling the challenges, the study team conducted interview and focus group discussions (FGDs) with Bede people. However, the team met with the sarder (group leader) who described the research purpose, and the use of information during the interview and focus group discussion. The team found elderly people find it easier to have a conversation. The study team appointed female members to discuss with female bedes.

### 2. Data collection and time period

The study's primary data were gathered through individual interviews conducted using the purposive sampling approach and each interview lasted around 30 to 40 minutes. For one-on-one interviews, the 70 participants were purposively chosen from the study's area of the community. Ten focus group discussions (FGDs) with seven to nine people in each group were participated in the research. The interviews centered on different facets pertaining to nomadic fishermen, specifically their social profile, the evolution of the Bede community, and their economic pursuits. Additionally, they analyzed the factors that impact their means of making a living. In addition, we requested participants to ascertain the factors responsible for ecological changes and propose possible remedies. To establish the authenticity of the field data, however, separate cross-check interviews with the reputable officials were also conducted. In addition, secondary data were gathered from a variety of sources, such as academic journals, pertinent books, papers, and other government agencies. The data were collected, and relevant working was conducted from May to August 2022.

### 3. Data analysis

The survey data were analyzed with MS Excel (2021), effectively presenting the findings. Qualitative interviews and focus group discussions were carried out in fishing villages to validate the quantitative findings. The iterative procedure yielded a thorough comprehension of the socio-economic dynamics and social vulnerability in nomadic fishing communities, hence augmenting the quantitative findings.

## RESULTS

### 1. Socio-demographic profile of the nomad fishers

The Bede communities of the study have 185 houses and support over 1000 people. A variety of socioeconomic and demographic traits of nomadic fishing community were investigated in this study. The gender distribution is balanced, with 40% of the sample being male and 60% being female. Moreover, the investigated population is homogeneous in terms of religious affiliation, with every member practicing Hinduism. An examination of the age distribution shows that the population is varied, with 20% of people under the age of 18, 50% of people between the ages of 18 and 30, and 15% of people in each of the age groups of 30-50 and over 50. Family dynamics show that smaller families are more common; 80% of families have between five and eight people, while just 18% have less than five. Only 2% of homes are made up of two people, making them extremely rare. In terms of literacy, 35% of people are illiterate and 50% of people can only sign their names, showing a low level of literacy. The percentage of individuals who complete primary education is 12%, but only 3% continue on to secondary education. Housing conditions are characterized by small tin sheds (65%) and medium-sized tin sheds (35%). Eighty percent of people have access to electricity, primarily generated by solar energy. Regarding medical care, the majority (40%) visit Upazila health complexes; 10% consult Kabirajs for traditional medicine, while 50% purchase their medications from village pharmacies. Approximately, 90% of households have access to tube wells for clean drinking water, and only 5% use river water. Fifty percent of the population utilizes sanitation facilities, which are split equally between pit latrines without ring slabs and ring slab latrines. Seventy percent of individuals use mobile phones, indicating that the population under study has moderate access to modern communication technology. Notably, all 190 households rely solely on fishing for their daily sustenance, making it their primary source of food. Additionally, they often work as hawkers and snake charmers, earning below 12,000 BDT (approximately 110 USD). These findings provide valuable insights into the socioeconomic and demographic profile of the population being studied, laying the groundwork for targeted interventions and policy development aimed at addressing the identified needs and inequalities.

**Table 1.** Social profile of the nomad fishers

Characteristics	Categories	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	40
	Female	60
Religion	Hindu	100
	Others	0
Age (Years)	Below 18 years	20
	18-30years	50
	30-50years	15
	Above 50 years	15
Family size	Less than 5 members	18
	5-8 member	80
	Above 8 members	2
Family type	Single	98
	Joint	2
Literacy rate	Illiterate	35
	Can only sign	50
	Primary	12
	Secondary	3
Housing condition	Tiny tin-shed	65
	Medium-sized tin-shed	35
Electricity	Yes (Solar energy)	80
	No	20
Health facilities	Upazila hospital	40
	Kabiraj	10
	Village pharmacy	50
Drinking water facility	Tube-well	95
	River water	5
Sanitation facilities	Ring slab latrine	50
	Pit without ring slab	50
Communication assets	Mobile Phone	70

## 2. Transformations of the bedecommunity

### 2.1 Changing mobility pattern

The waterway serves as the primary means of transportation for the *Bede*. Every family possesses a conventional vessel, akin to a portable dwelling, in which they store their possessions, trade goods, serpents, and so on. Typically, they travel in a fleet of boats. Upon arrival at a certain location, the fleet is brought to a halt where a temporary community is constructed in a nearby open territorial region, perhaps near a local market or on the banks of a river or canal in close proximity to the anchored fleet. The settlement location is usually government-owned *khas* land. The group *Sardar* negotiates with local leaders for allowing

them to anchor and build the temporary settlement. Their movement follows the previous mobility pathways; thus, they follow and visit the same mobility routes and destinations every year.

In the *Bede* language, the term "*gawal*" refers to a journey that involves engaging in floating businesses. The *Bede* community migrates with their families throughout this era, in accordance with the Bengali calendar and the fluctuations in seasons. The *gawal* commences in late Aagrahayan (November), coinciding with the onset of winter, and concludes in the latter half of Ashaah (June), signifying the end of the dry season. The approximate *gawal* period is 6 to 10 months a year; however, many of the *Bede* travels round the year, regardless of the season. In general, the journey follows the paddy harvesting time because rural agriculture-dependent people usually have cash flow in that period and have leisure time to enjoy the performances of the *Bede*, for which they pay with harvested crops. During the *gawal*, male members of the group play the role of guardians, while female members are mainly responsible for earning. The female members travel to nearby villages in the early morning for trading or other activities, and most male members stay in the boats and guard their belongings. Some male members often participate in catching snakes or engaging in diving for lost objects in ponds, etc.

The results of the study indicate that the movement patterns, timing, routes, and modes of mobility have undergone significant changes for a substantial portion of the *Bede* population. Despite the accessibility of boats, they are frequently opt for road transit to reach their destinations. A significant number of individuals, reflected by the findings, have divested themselves of their boats due to prolonged non-utilization. The shift in the method of transportation carries significant consequences in terms of their identification, as the term 'water gypsy' is becoming less pertinent. The use of roadways has led to transformations in community bonding, social structure, and institutions. Traveling on boat fleets had unified the community and strengthened bonds by allowing an opportunity for mutual sharing and support as well as close interactions, and for maintaining group homogeneity. Waterway travel had granted privilege to the *Sardars* to wield firm control over their communities and exert power over political and social affairs. They were the ultimate voices of the community, both in internal and external matters. However, the change in mobility pattern from waterway to roadway now enables group members to decide on their routes, destinations, duration, and trading patterns. While the *Sardars* used to be the 'ultimate' decision makers on every community affair, they are now often limited to giving decisions on internal political and external matters. The community members now deal with internal social issues. Thus, it holds that the *Sardars* had over their communities and the homogeneity of the groups has gradually diminished. Nevertheless, this loss of control is hardly acknowledged by them, as evidenced by a discussion held by the research team with a *Sardar*. He did not readily acknowledge the weakening of his power and position in the community.

There are several reasons behind the changing mobility pattern. According to field findings, the *Bede* people now consider manually rowed boats to be at odds with the modern speed-driven mode of travel. Manually rowed boat fleets take a long time to reach destinations, thereby reducing the time that could be spent in trading and earning. Hampered trading time

and reduced income therefore inspire the *Bede* to opt for the faster roadway travel mode instead of slow-paced row boats. A small number of the *Bede* usually travel a short distance for trading and often take public buses with sedentary people. The *Bede* are exposed to and influenced by sedentary cultures through their interactions with sedentary people. However, they often face awkward situations and experience problems during such travels. According to them, traveling on the boat fleet is safer and more secure for them.

## 2.2 Changing livelihoods and economic activities

Traditionally, the *Bede* community engages in customary economic pursuits that differ based on sub-groups. In general, these activities can be classified as follows: 1) fishing, 2) small-scale commerce, 3) serpent enchantment and curative practices, 4) diving to retrieve lost possessions, 5) circus performances (including exhibitions with monkeys and magic show), and 6) divination. Among these categories, the prevailing livelihood groups consist of serpent charmers, healers, and petty traders. Women play a central role in the dominant economic activities, visiting villages for trading and serpent charming. While staying on boats, male members often catch fish from rivers and canals for subsistence, and often for small-scale sale to nearby local markets. The *Bede* in our study villages were found to be rarely engaged in commercial fishing in estuaries. The male members of the *Bede* group predominantly engage in fishing, diving, circus shows, and divination.

The following table shows group and sub-group wise economic activities. According to the table, there are three major groups in the study area: the *Malbede*, the *Shandarbede*, and the *Bajikor*. The *Malbede* is the dominant group that comprises the majority of the *Bede*. Among of them, the *Sapurja* (serpent charmers and healers) is the most dominant group. This occupation is their identity marker. People in rural regions cannot conceive of the *Bede* without their serpents; one is inextricably linked to the other. However, this subgroup has no further divisions. The next subgroup, known as the *Malbede*, includes three additional subgroups: a) the *Toiri*, who are involved in making and selling toys; b) the *Badge*, who sell inexpensive cosmetics; and c) the *Laou/Boiral*, who sell amulets, herbal medicines, and fish.

The next major group comprises the *Shandarbede*, who are involved in trading jewellery/ornaments, household utensils, amulets, etc. Some of them are also engaged in diving in ponds to search for items/ornaments lost by sedentary people. A small section of them is involved in fishing, circus shows, including monkey shows and magic shows. This group includes three sub-groups: the *Rayenda*, the *Rashia* and the *Pakhmara*. The *Rayenda* group has two other sub-groups namely: the *Nagarchi* and the *Kurinda*. The *Pakhmara*, on the other hand, have two sub-groups: the *Bohurupi* and the *Potua*. However, the *Rashia* sub-group has no further sub-groups. The sub-group called the *Potua* could not be located in our study villages. Finally, the group called the *Bajikor* has one sub-group: the *Bandurebede*. Although not as significantly high in number as the *Malbede*, many among the *Bede* community belong to the *Bandurebede* group. Their focus of activity is circus, monkey show, and fortune-telling.

**Table 2.** Economic activities of the Bede people by groups/sub-groups

Group	Sub-group	Further Sub-group	Economic activities
<i>Malbede</i>	<i>Sapuria</i>	Not found	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Catching and selling snakes</li> <li>• Fishing</li> <li>• Serpent shows</li> <li>• Healing</li> </ul>
		<i>Toiri</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selling children's toys</li> </ul>
	<i>Bebajia</i>	<i>Badge</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selling women's cosmetics</li> <li>• Selling amulets, herbal medicines</li> </ul>
		<i>Laouo/Boiral</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fishing</li> </ul>
<i>Shandarbede</i>	<i>Rayenda</i>	<i>Nagarchi</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fishing</li> </ul>
		<i>Kurinda</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selling women's ornaments</li> </ul>
	<i>Rashia</i>	Not found	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finding lost objects by diving into ponds</li> </ul>
		<i>Bohurupi</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selling amulets, stone rings, etc.</li> <li>• Making people's portraits</li> <li>• Holding circus shows, including monkey shows and magic shows</li> </ul>
<i>Pakhmara</i>	<i>Potua</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making people's portraits</li> </ul>	
<i>Bajikor</i>	<i>Bandurebede</i>	Not found	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holding circus shows, including monkey shows and magic shows</li> <li>• Fortune-telling</li> <li>• Fishing</li> </ul>

Source: Field Note (2022)

In the following sections, these activities, including how they have changed, are described:

### 3 Major declining economic activities

#### 3.1 Serpent charming and healing

The primary economic activity of the *Bede* people revolves around the management and manipulation of serpent. A significant portion of them make a career by showcasing their expertise in snake captivating and selling them. Typically, these groups assemble snakes while they are on their travels. They traverse nearby jungles, woodlands, riversides, and croplands in search of serpents. They possess the expertise to deal with deadly serpents and domesticate them. Residents of rural coastal regions are susceptible to snake bites due to the frequent presence of serpents within the earthen flooring of their houses. In such instances, it is customary to call upon the *Bede* to capture the snakes (Fig. 1). The *Bede* thereafter subdues those serpents by confining them within opaque wooden containers for a brief while. Subsequently, the snakes exhibit a calm and manageable demeanor when shown to an audience. The presentations are quite popular and people are willing to pay a nominal fee to witness the snake performances. These *Bede* groups are also involved in local healing practices with herbal medicines and treatment of pain with cow horns (called *Shinga*). Using cow horn for treatment is thus another traditional practice of the *Bede*.



However, the activities of serpent charming and healing have been declining over the years. Healthcare facilities and health-seeking behaviors of local people have changed as a result of modern medicine. Except for a very few among the poor and among people living in remote rural areas, people these days no longer believe in or prefer traditional healing. As one healer laments:

“We follow the conventional method of alleviating physical pain by sucking it out with a cup made of cow horn. I have learned this age-old method of removing pain from my mother. I have taught my two daughters, and hope that they too will continue and pass on the skill to the next generation. We use this method of treatment on ourselves as well. In our experience, many of our patients have felt good after being treated. Unfortunately, people these days have stopped believing in us. They would rather go to doctors as they think we are frauds.”



**Fig.1.**Declining major economic activities

The declining snake population in rural regions is an additional factor contributing to this loss. Rural regions are experiencing a significant rise in population, hindering the free movement of snakes. Consequently, farmers are no longer able to maintain their property in a state of unaltered leisure, which serves as a habitat for serpent to wander. This country is currently undergoing a significant increase in both legal and illicit deforestation, primarily driven by the desire to promote industrial development. As a consequence, forestland —the safest abode for snakes— is decreasing. In addition, uncontrolled use of pesticides on agricultural land and use of other tropes are killing off snakes. All these factors are thus hampering the *Bede*'s snake charming and traditional healing activities as well as shrinking their destination sites.

### 3.2 Petty trading

Another important economic activity of the *Bede* is petty trading. Both the *Malbede* and the *Shandarbede* are involved in trading. The trade items include herbal medicines, household utensils, clothing, cheap cosmetics for women, handmade toys, etc. Female members are solely involved in trading in rural villages, including selling items bought from wholesale urban markets at cheap prices. Before the *gawal* starts, a group of women traders visit cheap markets to buy select items/goods and store them in their boats. After the *gawal* begins and they are settled on land, female traders set out on foot each morning to sell those items/goods artfully placed on flat baskets carried on their heads. Walking with a loaded basket on the head is difficult, according to them.

However, petty trading is also showing a declining trend. The primary reason is that rural customers have access to modern markets and items/goods at their doorsteps. In the globalized world, customers have the opportunity to visit different kinds of markets, examine a variety of products, and buy as per their choice. In this context, the goods sold door-to-door by the *Bede* are considered to be of low quality and sell at much lower prices than that paid by the *Bede* initially. At times, while attempting to sell their goods to male customers, the female traders also face sexual harassment in the guise of bargaining. They told the research team:

“Everything that we sell can be found in village markets. We cannot offer our customers anything new or different. When we try to sell them anything, they offer us the lowest possible price, which does not even come close to what we had paid in the first place. There is no profit, and all our efforts and labor are in vain.”

As aforementioned, the female traders frequent encompassing urban wholesale markets to purchase things at affordable prices. Nevertheless, there has been a significant increase in pricing within wholesale markets, which is directly impacting their input expenses. To reduce expenses, they are now compelled to abstain from using public transportation and instead travel on foot from one location to another to sell their goods. In addition, the goods available for purchase by rural shops from vendors, as well as the products that people can buy from these rural stores, are significantly more affordable compared to the pricing set by the *Bede*.

Rural markets now persist products of comparable or even higher quality at a lower price point. Previously, handmade goods were highly valued by rural residents. Consumers have lost interest in making purchases from the *Bede*. As a result, *Bede* traders are in dire need of a resolution and are contemplating the formation of a sedentary enterprise to operate in local markets.

### 3.3 Fishing

The *Bede* practices subsistence fishing throughout their travel routes and/or in nearby rivers and canals where their boat fleet is anchored. When there is surplus catch, *Bede* fishers sell it in local rural market. Male members of the community play the primary role in the fishing activity. However, if a scarcity of capital for trading is anticipated, both male and female

members jointly participate in the activity with hooks and nets, aiming for bigger catch that can be sold to regain cash flow.

Fishers covered in our study reported that they have experienced difficulties in taking up commercial fishing in open waterbodies. Open water fishing was usually controlled by local moneylenders or merchants who provided fishing boats, gear, and cash for fishing. The fishers also took up bonded fishing, which means that those who were financially constrained take loans (locally called *dadon*) from merchants on condition that they sold their catch only to them and at any price set by them. Commercial fishing in open waterbodies was also difficult for *Bede* fishers since they did not have the right connections because of their ‘different’ social standing and identity. In their words:

“We are fishers by birth as we live on the water. However, we often do not have access to open waterbody as local fisher community has the muscle power to monopolies it. Many of us tried to get involved in the *dadon* system, but the local moneylenders did not trust us because of our *Bede* identity and gypsy nature.”

### ***3.4 Impact of modernization on nomad fishers***

The research showed the significant impacts of modernization on many facets of the lives of nomadic fishermen through in-depth analysis. It was discovered that customary forms of subsistence were challenged by economic transformations brought about by market integration and technical improvements, which also disturbed traditional fishing techniques. In addition, modernization processes worsened environmental degradation, which presented further challenges to the viability of nomadic fishermen' livelihoods. The study also looked at the cultural and social effects of modernization, such as how social structures, identity dynamics, and community cohesion had changed. It clarified social norms and beliefs affected the livelihood tactics and methods of adaptation used by nomadic fishers to withstand the demands of modernization.

### ***3.5 Changing socio-political life***

Traditionally, the *Bede* community follows the closed tribal socio-political system. As such, they usually did not allow anyone but the *Bede* to be connected to them through marital or other relationships, fearing a loss of homogeneity. The endogenous marriage system was strictly followed. The *Sarder* had the final say in all matters like family or socio-political. Every group member had to abide by his commands and decisions and violation was regarded as a punishable offense.

Nevertheless, the integrity of this enclosed system has been significantly disrupted in the investigated settlements. A substantial portion of individuals evaluated were found to have adopted residence in those villages for an extended duration. They have acquired property and obtained national identity cards. Additionally, they actively participate in local politics under the guidance of local political leaders, and a few of them have successfully grabbed positions as elected members in the democratic elections at the Union Parishad level. Several *Bede* boys

actively participate in local politics and serve as devoted supporters of local political leaders. Regrettably, this group of adolescent males is also engaged in illicit drug trafficking with the patronage of local political leaders. The *Bede* have indeed emerged as a potential political group. In exchange, the political leaders provide them with national identities as well as financial and political support. The government has implemented many mainstreaming programs for the *Bede* community, including provisions for education, healthcare, and other civil amenities. However, the distribution of these services has not been equitable for all members of the group. However, to quote a respondent: “After getting voting rights, we have become a political factor in this area. As we are huge potential voters, local political leaders visit us and commit to our protection. Two of us have already been elected in the local election, and we hope this number will increase shortly.”

A few instances of exogamous marriage were also unveiled through this study, involving *Bede* men and women who were discovered to have tied the knot with the dominant neighboring community. Notwithstanding this, the situation presents an exceptional circumstance in which a small number of economically disadvantaged Bengali Muslims interacted frequently with members of the *Bede* community. The relationships have progressively gained acceptability, despite initial disapproval from both parties. Thus, the increasing exogamous marital practices and involvement in local politics have brought noticeable consequences for the *Bede*'s social structures, political organizations and social standing. Although they still claim their *Bede* identity, they are becoming increasingly open to accepting dominant cultural elements in their lifestyle. The sedentary settlement in our study area has become a key fusion point, where the *Bede* from different parts of the country visit regularly and are exposed to a modern and sedentary lifestyle. The *Bede* people, traditionally nomads, have been encouraged by their consistent contact with the outside world to embrace a more settled way of life.

Because of regular movement, the *Bede* cannot send their children to school. The admission process requires national identification-related documents such as national ID cards, birth registration cards, citizenship identification cards, etc. Most of the *Bede* people do not have these documents and hence cannot get their children enrolled in school. A few floating schools are operated by non-government Organizations (NGOs), which provide primary education to *Bede* children. Our study also found that a growing number of *Bede* children, whose families have lived here for a long time and received identification-related documents, are actually enrolled in government primary schools. However, these children experience constant discrimination and stigmatization. Their exposure to modern culture and materialism is altering their perception of the ancient nomadic lifestyle, deeming it unfavorable or aberrant, while favoring and considering sedentary living as positive, normal, and anticipated. As a result, these children are maturing with a distinct aspiration to abandon conventional professions and transition toward a more sedentary future.

## DISCUSSION

In the conventional view, movement or mobility is the characterizing feature of *Bede* identity. The word *Bede* originates etymologically from the word *Bedouin* —a nomadic Arab tribe in

the Middle East. The *Bede* people of Bengal trace back their origin to that tribe, although no solid historical evidence is documented in favor of this claim (**Gatewood & McCay, 1988; Onyango, 2011; Islam et al., 2017**). Waterway is the main mobility route of the *Bede* people, on which they trade, live, and have developed their socio-cultural institutions for generations (**Sunny et al., 2023**).

Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that traditional mobility has endured significant transformations over the course of time, impacting *Bede's* economic endeavors, socio-cultural interactions, and aspirations. Despite the spatial and temporal transformation involved in settling on land and adopting a sedentary lifestyle, the *Bede* still have a deep feeling of devotion to their nomadic way of life (**Allison & Ellis, 2001**). In the study area, while a significant number of *Bede* individuals have established permanent residences, a considerable portion of them continue to engage in the practice of *gawal*, either for short or extended durations (**Sunny et al., 2020**). Short-term *gawal* refers to visiting a rural area close to their neighborhood. The mode of travel is often on foot if the destination is nearby. For short trips, such as to nearby districts or sub-districts, the *Bede* access public transportation, specifically buses, alongside individuals who lead a sedentary lifestyle (**Badjeck, 2008**). Frequently, they engage the services of a communal mode of transportation, such as a bus or truck, and relocate together. To undertake longer or more distant journeys, a significant number of individuals from the study area relocate using their fleet of boats. There are numerous factors that contribute to this transition. The study demonstrates that conventional economic activities are no longer suitable for the contemporary neoliberal economy (**Hossain et al., 2023a**). The proliferation of contemporary medical institutions has restricted the prevalence of the therapeutic traditions of the *Bede*. The worldwide supply chain enables the delivery of a wide range of products to rural customers, at a more affordable price compared to the *Bede's* asking price. The mobility and immobility of the *Bede's* are determined by the simultaneous rapid development of road networks and transportation infrastructure, the increasing limitation of navigation channels due to siltation and reduced upstream flow, and the variable climatic conditions of rivers (**Zafar et al., 2007**). As the *Bede's* traditional indifference to territorial attachment is viewed as 'abnormal' in the modern concept of the nation-state, the government does not recognize them as citizens and denies them civic rights and facilities. Furthermore, sedentary people/ neighbors of *Bede* communities consider them to be 'impure', 'outcasts' or 'bad Muslims'. Daily social interactions with neighbors are discouraged, and as such, full assimilation into the dominant Bengali community is taking a long time (**Sen, 2000; Badjeck, 2007**). Their neighbors sometimes even distort the word *Bede* to '*baidani*', particularly in reference to the *Bede* women, giving the word a derogatory twist. As the study shows, the children of the settled *Bede* who are enrolled into local educational institutions are often bullied and mocked by their neighbors or fellow students. This social position has brought a significant change in their psychology, leading them to aspire to a new sedentary future (**Hossain et al., 2023b**). Thus, the younger generations of the *Bede* now look down upon their ancestral occupations and mobile lifestyle.

Although there is a gradual transformation of the *Bede* people to a sedentary lifestyle, we can argue that their circumstances indicate a duality between mobility and immobility. This duality, therefore, leads us to move beyond the binary of sedentarism and nomadism and to

focus on the ‘mobility’ concept to unpack ‘when and why do people decide to move—or not to move under various pressures and circumstances’ (Aloket *et al.*, 2018). The desperation of the *Bede* for a sedentary lifestyle does not obliterate their legacy of nomadism or traditional lifestyle. Drawing on Ali *et al.* (2010), we equate this duality with ‘liminality’: a betwixt and between situation and an intersecting space between movement and non-movement’. According to this view, the *Bede* is in the middle phase of a process, in which they are ‘no longer mobile’ (in the traditional sense) and ‘not yet sedentary’ (Khan, 2006; Pomeroyet *et al.*, 2017). This ambiguity develops a ‘quasi-nomadic’ identity for them, which is co-constructive and which is enacted in the interplay between the *Bede*’s self-imagination (their aspiration for a sedentary lifestyle) and their ‘social identity’ (derived from external discourses, institutions, and culture) (Onyango, 2011; Khan *et al.*, 2018; Moniruzzaman *et al.*, 2023). Externally, the government now tends to ‘mainstream’ the *Bede* with interventions (such as education projects). In addition, the local political heads capitalize on them as a provable vote bank and as loyal political supporters. They play a crucial role in determining the *Bede* community’s mobility and immobility thanks to the rural clientelist political system.

## CONCLUSION

The itinerant fishermen of Bangladesh, equipped with specialized fishing skills and access to fishing areas, often secure a more lucrative livelihood. However, their overall welfare is compromised due to inadequate access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and nutrition, rendering their livelihoods unsustainable. The isolated nature of life on houseboats exacerbates their vulnerability and risk of social isolation. To address these challenges, both governmental and non-governmental entities must implement comprehensive measures aimed at enhancing the welfare of the nomadic population. A significant barrier to their sustainability is the lack of land ownership; providing access to homestead land is crucial for ensuring sanitation, education, and basic amenities. The newly constructed river islands (Chars) could serve as ideal sites for rehabilitation. While some nomadic fishermen may consider permanent land residency, many are reluctant to abandon their traditional fishing methods. Therefore, securing ongoing access to fishing areas is essential for sustaining their livelihoods and achieving greater economic success. Education is vital for improving their social and economic status and reducing poverty; government programs like Conditional Cash Transfers can boost school attendance, diminish child labor, and prevent intergenerational poverty. During fishing bans, it is crucial to prevent food insecurity and shortages of essential goods for nomadic fishermen. The government should offer financial compensation for lost earnings and involve them in incentive programs, such as those supporting the hilsa fishing. Additionally, efforts should be made to reduce reliance on unstable fisheries by expanding alternative employment opportunities. Engaging the nomadic fishing communities in the design of livelihood interventions will ensure that these programs address their specific needs. A holistic approach that encompasses the entire value chain—not just production—will facilitate the gradual transition of nomadic fishermen toward a more stable and environmentally sustainable lifestyle, balancing the necessity of mobility with the benefits of stability.

## REFERENCES

- Alam, K.; Jahan, N.; Chowdhury, R.; Mia, M.T.; Saleheen, S.; Hossain, N.M. and Sazzad, S.A.** (2023a). Impact of Brand Reputation on Initial Perceptions of Consumers. *Pathfinder of Research*, 1 (1), 1-10.
- Alam, K.; Jahan, N.; Chowdhury, R.; Mia, M.T.; Saleheen, S.; Sazzad, S.A.; Hossain, N.M. and Mithun, M.H.** (2023b). Influence of Product Design on Consumer Purchase Decisions. *Pathfinder of Research*, 1 (1), 23-36.
- Allison, E.H. and Ellis, F.** (2001). The livelihoods approach and management of small scale fisheries. *Marine Policy*, 25:377–388.
- Ali, H.; Azad, M. A. K.; Anisuzzaman, M.; Chowdhury, M. M. R.; Hoque, M. and Sharful, M. I.** (2010). Livelihood status of the fish farmers in some selected areas of Tarakandaupazila of Mymensingh district. *J. Agrofor. Environ*, 3(2), 85-89.
- Alok, K.P.; Shapon, K.B.; Mohammad, S.I. and Hussain, M.A.** (2018). Comparative socioeconomic study with a review on fisherman's livelihood around Tulsiganga river, Joypurhat, Bangladesh. *Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Science*. Doi: 10.3923/jfas.2018
- Bari, K.F.; Salam, M.T.; Hasan, S. E. and Sunny, A.R.** (2023). Serum zinc and calcium level in patients with psoriasis. *Journal of Knowledge Learning and Science Technology*, 2(3), 7-14. ISSN: 2959-6386 (online).
- Badjeck, M.C.** (2008). Vulnerability of coastal fishing communities to climate variability and change: implications for fisheries livelihoods and management in Peru, University of Bremen, Bremen/[http://deposit.ddb.de/cgi-bin/dokserv?idn=989897052&dok\\_var=d1&dok\\_ext=pdf&filename=989897052.pdf](http://deposit.ddb.de/cgi-bin/dokserv?idn=989897052&dok_var=d1&dok_ext=pdf&filename=989897052.pdf)
- Chakma, S.; Paul, A.K.; Rahman, M.A.; Hasan, M.M.; Sazzad, S.A. and Sunny, A.R.** (2022). Climate Change Impacts and Ongoing Adaptation Measures in the Bangladesh Sundarbans. *Egyptian Journal of Aquatic Biology and Fisheries*, 26(2): 329-48.
- Das, B.** (2013). Rough sailing for Bangladesh river-gypsies. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/01/201312181138776540.html>. Accessed 8 July 2015.
- Drinkwater, K.F.; Beaugrand, G.; Kaeriyama, M.; Kim, S.; Ottersen, G.; Perry, R.I.; Portner, H.O.; Polovina, J.J. and Takasuka, A.** (2010). On the processes linking climate to ecosystem changes. *Marine System*, 79: 374–388.
- Gatewood, J.B. and McCay, B.J.** (1988). Job satisfaction and the culture of fishing: A comparison of Six New Jersey Fisheries. *MAST*, 1(2): 103-128.
- Hossain I.S.M.; Ashakin, M.R.; Hossain, B.; Afrin, S.; Sattar, A.; Chowdhury, R.; Tusher, M.I.; Bhowmik, P.K.; Mia, M.T.; Islam, T.; Tufael, M. and Sunny, A.R.** (2023a). IOT-Based Smart Agriculture in Bangladesh: An Overview. *Applied Agriculture Sciences*, 1(1), 1-6. 9563, [10.25163/agriculture.119563](https://doi.org/10.25163/agriculture.119563).

- Hossain, I.S.M.; Bayazid, H.; Ashakin, M.R.; Tusher, M.I.; Shadhin, R.H.; Hoque, J.; Chowdhury, R. and Sunny, A.R.** (2023b). Adoption of IoT in Agriculture - Systematic Review, *Applied Agriculture Sciences*, 1(1), 1-10, 9676
- Islam, M. M.** (2011). Living on the margin: the poverty-vulnerability nexus in the small-scale fisheries of Bangladesh. In: Jentoft S, Eide A (eds) *Poverty mosaics: Realities and prospects in small-scale fisheries*. Springer Science+Business Media, Dordrecht, pp 71–95.
- Islam, M. M.** (2018). *Boat, Waters and Livelihoods: —A Study on Nomadic Fishers in the Meghna River Estuary of Bangladesh*.
- Islam, M. M. and Chuenpagdee, R.** (2018). Nomadic fishers in the hilsa sanctuary of Bangladesh: The importance of social and cultural values for well-being and sustainability. In *Social Wellbeing and the Values of Small-Scale Fisheries*; Springer: Cham, Swizerland,; pp. 195–216.
- Islam, M.M. and Chuenpagdee, R.** (2017). Nomadic fishers in the hilsa sanctuary of Bangladesh: The importance of social and cultural values for wellbeing and sustainability, in D.S. Johnson et al. (eds.), *Social Wellbeing and the Values of Small-Scale Fisheries*. MARE Publication Series 17. Cham, Switzerland: Springer. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-60750-4\_9.
- Islam, M.M.; Islam, N.; Mostafiz, M.; Sunny, A.R.; Keus, H.J.; Karim, M.; Hossain, M.Z. and Sarker, S.** (2018a). Balancing between livelihood and biodiversity conservation: A model study on gear selectivity for harvesting small indigenous fishes in southern Bangladesh. *Zoology and Ecology*. doi:10.1080/21658005.2018.
- Islam, M.M.; Islam, N.; Sunny, A.R.; Jentoft, S.; Ullah, M.H. and Sharifuzzaman, S.M.** (2016). Fishers' perceptions of the performance of hilsa shad (*Tenualosailisha*) sanctuaries in Bangladesh. *Ocean & Coastal Management*, **130**: 309-316.
- Islam, M.M.; Shamsuzzaman, M.M.; Sunny, A.R. and Islam, N.** (2017). Understanding fishery conflicts in the hilsa sanctuaries of Bangladesh. In: *Inter-Sectoral Governance of Inland Fisheries*. Song, A.M., Bower, S.D., Onyango, P., Cooke, S.J., & Chuenpagdee, R. (eds.), pp18-31 TBTI Publication Series, St John's, NL, Canada.
- Islam, M.M.; Sunny, A.R.; Hossain, M.M. and Friess, D.** (2018b). Drivers of mangrove ecosystem service change in the sundarbans of Bangladesh. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*. doi:10.1111/sjtg.12241.
- Jentoft, S.** (2007). In the power of power: the understated aspect of fisheries management. *Hum Orga*, 66(4):426–436.
- Jentoft, S.; Eide, A.; Bavinck, M.; Chuenpagdee, R. and Raakjær, J.** (2011). A better future: prospects for small-scale fishing people. In: *Poverty mosaics: Realities and prospects in small-scale fisheries*. Springer.



- Khan, J. A.** (2006). “Bedeý”, <http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=bede&oldid=18063>. Accessed, 8 September 2017.
- Khan, M.I.; Islam, M.M.; Kundu, G.K. and Akter, M.S.** (2018). Understanding the livelihood characteristics of the migratory and non-migratory fishers of the Padma River, Bangladesh. *J. Sci. Res.*, **10**(3): 261-273.
- Kuddus, M.A.; Alam, M.J.; Datta, G.C.; Miah, M.A.; Sarker, A.K. and Sunny, M.A.R.** (2021). Climate resilience technology for year round vegetable production in northeastern Bangladesh. *Int. J. Agril. Res. Innov. Tech.*, **11**(1): 29-36. <https://doi.org/10.3329/ijarit.v11i1.54464>.
- Kuddus, M.A.; Datta, G.C.; Miah, M.A.; Sarker, A.K.; Hamid, S.M.A. and Sunny, A.R.** (2020). Performance study of selected orange fleshed sweet potato varieties in North Eastern Bangladesh. *International Journal of Environment, Agriculture and Biotechnology*, **5**(3): 673-682.
- Kuddus, M.A.; Sunny, A.R.; Sazzad, S.A.; Hossain, M.; Rahman, M.; Mithun, M.H.; Ifat, S.E.H.; Ahmed, K.J.; Zandonadi, R.P.; Han, H., Montes, A.A.; Vega, A.A. and Raposo, A.** (2022). Sense and Manner of WASH and Their Coalition with Disease and Nutritional Status of Under-five Children in Rural Bangladesh: A Cross-Sectional Study. *Frontiers in Public Health*, **10**.
- Sazzad, S.A.; Mithun, M.H.; Mr, M.; Ahmed, A.; Samiullah, M.; Hamid, M.A.; Ali, H.M. and Sunny, A.R.** (2024). Nomad Fishers: A Socially Excluded and Climate Vulnerable Fishing Community in Bangladesh. Doi: [10.20944/preprints202407.1150.v1](https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202407.1150.v1)
- Moniruzzaman, M.; Sazzad, S.A.; Hoque, J. and Sunny, A.R.** (2023). Influence of Globalization on Youth Perceptions on Changing Muslim Rituals in Bangladesh. *Pathfinder of Research*, **1** (1), 11-22.
- Onyango, P.O.** (2011). Occupation of last resort? Small-scale fishing in Lake Victoria, Tanzania. In: Jentoft S, Eide A (eds) *Poverty mosaics: Realities and prospects in small-scale fisheries*. Springer Science+Business Media B.V, Dordrecht, pp 97–124.
- Pomeroy, R.; Ferrer A.J. and Pedrajas, J.** (2017). An analysis of livelihood projects and programs for fishing communities in the Philippines, *Marine Policy*, **81**: 250- 55.
- Rahman, M.M.; Haque, M.M.; Akhteruzzamam, M. and Khan, S.** (2002). Socioeconomic features of a traditional fishing community beside the old Brahmaputra river, Mymensingh, Bangladesh. *Asian Fish Sci*, **15**:371–386.
- Rana, M.S.; Uddin, N.; Bashir, M.S.; Das, S.S.; Islam, M.S. and Sikder, N.F.** (2023). Effect of *Stereospermumpersonatum*, *Senna obtusifolia* and *Amomumsubulatum* extract in Hypoglycemia on Swiss Albino mice model. *Pathfinder of Research*, **1**(1).
- Sen, A.** (2000). Social exclusion: Concept, application and scrutiny, Social Development Paper No. 1. Manila: Asian Development Bank.

**Sunny, A.R.; Hoque, J.; Shadhin, R.H.; Islam, M.S.; Hamid, M.A. and Hussain, M.** (2023). Exploring the Socioeconomic Landscape of Dependent Communities in HakalukiHaor. *Pathfinder of Research*, 1 (1), 37-46.

**Sunny, A.R.; Reza, J.; Anas, M.; Hassan, M.N.; Baten, M.A.; Hasan, R.; Monwar, M.M.; Solaimoan, H. and Hossain, M.M.** (2020). Biodiversity assemblages and conservation necessities of ecologically sensitive natural wetlands of north eastern Bangladesh. *Indian Journal of Geo-Marine Sciences*, **49**(1): 135-148.

**Zafar, S.M.; Amin, N. and Iqbal, M.J.** (2007). Biodiversity of fisheries organisms in the Pagla River of Bangladesh. *Bangladesh Journal of Fisheries*, 30:165-175.