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Bede community: The victims of urbanisation

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The Greek word 'Nomades' is considered to be source of the English word 'Nomadia' or 'Nomads' (often known as Roma/Gypsies or Sinti depending on places or regions) that signifies a group of people who are used to moving from places to places, and are least bothered/interested to settle down in a given location permanently. In fact, they are distinct ethnic minority dispersed worldwide and usually form a separate social group having different indicia from the mainstream society where they prefer to live, presently around 30-40 million (estimated) of such nomads are scattered across continents around the world.

Generally, in terms of social, economic and political conditions, these groups of people encounter extreme vulnerability that gets manifested through poverty, illiteracy due to lack of education and opportunity or access to education, sub-standard living conditions. They are often subjected to human rights violations, primarily due to discrimination and racial violence.

Surprisingly enough, in international sphere until 1991, different bodies of United Nations, those that were actively involved to combat racism, there was no reference of Nomads. But in 2000, the Committee for Elimination of Racial Discrimination adopted a recommendation that urges State parties (all members of CERD) to take-up measures with determined political will and moral leadership towards protection of Nomads/Roma from racial violence and improvement of their living conditions by formulating and implementing national strategies that would be practical as well as pragmatic. To be precise, international instruments, i.e., Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and other instruments (ICCPR, CEDAW, CAT, ICESCR and CRC, etc.) contain essential human rights principles that establish rights for these groups of Nomads to be enjoyed and maintained without discrimination. There are several cases, both in international and European level that provide verdicts upholding non-discrimination, i.e., the cases of *L. R. et al v The Slovak Republic*, *Dzemajl et al v Yugoslavia*, *Assenov et al. v Bulgaria*, *Velikova v Bulgaria*, *Chapman v The United Kingdom* and *Moldvan and others v Romania* deal with issues concerning discrimination and infringement of human dignity, in one form or the other, against Nomads/Roma people in Slovak Republic, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, the United Kingdom and Romania respectively.

In Bangladesh, we have Nomads too but unlike other continents they are water-bound, who mostly are used to living in canals and rivers and drift along through those (around 10 months or so in every year and as monsoon ends they return to live in land for a short while temporarily to observe wedding, circumcisions and other ceremonies and for dispute resolutions) and earned their livelihood as snake charmers, indigenous medicines, river-oyster pearls and talisman seller, as well as entertainers of magic and monkey acrobatic shows. These rivers nomads/Romas/Gypsies are locally known as Bede who customarily follows matriarchal society norms

(like some ethnic minority groups of Bangladesh such as Garo people) and thus, unlike women from Bengali family, they are bread-earners and are not only courageous but usually of daunted character. There are about a million of them in Bangladesh.

Gradually over the years and in the recent past, Bangladesh is experiencing rapid urbanisation and even the rural inhabitants not only gradually as accustomed with hygienic and decent living, but also became inclined towards adaptation of modern way of life. Such social changes that has happened due to advancement of technology and medical science even force the Bede community to become professionally and economically vulnerable and marginalised, for neither the traditional age-old indigenous treatment and spiritual healing nor use of talisman could anymore attract someone or acceptable generally.

It is gainsaying to note that the Bangladesh Government in recent past, took initiatives to settle Bede people/community in the mainland (as in Lauhajong village and by the Bongshi river in Savar Municipal Area, etc. – Gram Bangla Unnayan Committee Report, 2007) with the idea to bring and integrate this community within the mainstream of our society in order to get rid off some problems that they face (i.e. educational difficulty, work to get economically stable, unavailability to market their conventional products, etc.) due to their age-old intrinsic way of living and traditional custom – ethnically nomadic mobile. Nevertheless, fact remains that Bedes are generally become professionally and economically vulnerable and marginalised too due to development of medical science and technological advancement, specially change of modern social outlook. Though, swelling rivers of Bengal will continue to flow relentlessly, would/can Bede people endure the gusty wind of urbanisation?