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Begun**

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## Fighting Identity Crisis: Journey of Bengal's Nomadic Tribes Towards Mainstream Has Just Begun



Fading identity amid urban sprawl – nomads played an important role during the British era in various fields like handicrafts, animal husbandry, story-telling, tattooing, fortune-telling, snake charming, acrobatics and in ayurvedic medicines. However, due to modernisation followed by rural encroachments, these nomadic tribes have lost their jobs, dignity and identity in today's society.

The consequences of unplanned urbanisation over the years turned out to be disastrous for them as most of the nomads landed in begging while some are still struggling to make a living through acrobatics, animal shows and selling ayurvedic medicines. There are many nomads who don't even have surnames and prefer to be called with unique names like 'Parking Bediya', 'Platform Bediya' and even 'Lal Badshah' and 'Bahubali Bediya' are not difficult to find. 'Bediya' or 'Bede' (in Bangla), meaning 'forest dwellers', is a community originally from northern India that migrated to all over the country, with sizable numbers in Bengal, and they are entirely Hindu. Those who converted to Islam called themselves 'Sapuriah' and their main profession was snake charming.

Concerned over their fading identity, a Kolkata-based group of researchers for more than two years has been silently working extensively on these tribes in Bengal to bring them to the mainstream.

They are also trying to connect the nomads with the areas where they have expertise and could earn some money in a dignified way rather than begging on roads and railway stations. Speaking to the News18.com, Deep Purkayastha, director of Praajak, an NGO working for the welfare of nomads in Bengal, said, "We are working on this project for more than two years and while going deeper, we have found several interesting facts about these nomads and

their lifestyle. Our whole mission is to bring them into the mainstream and to give them a dignified way of living.

” As per the Renke Commission Report, 2008, and based on late author Mahasweta Devi’s research, there are 10 denotified tribes in West Bengal including Bediya (Bedia or Beria), Karwal Nat, Bhar, Dhekaru, Maghaiya Domes (Moghaya), Gond (Gonda) and Lodha (Kheria or Kharia), Lodhas, Sabars and Dhikaros. And, total nomadic tribes are 38 (as per Renke Commission Report, 2008): Abdal (Dafali), Bagdi (Duley), Bahelia, Bajkar (Bazigar), Bantar, Bauri, Bedia (Bediya), Beldar, Bhind, Bhuiya (Birhor), Chakma, Dhawa, Dhimal, Doai, Fakir (Sain), Gareri, Ghasi, Gond, Jhalo (Malo), Kadar, Kahar, Kakmara, Kanjar, Keot (Keyot), Kharia, Kharwar, Kurariar, Lskhera (Laahera), Limbu, Malhar, Mallah, Musahar, Nat, Oraon, Patni, Santhal and Yogi (Nath). While elaborating more on ‘Nomad-O-Nomics’, Purkayastha said, “Take for example Bediya or Bede community. We managed to contact nearly 750-800 families including 40 families in Alipurduar, 150 in Jalpaiguri, 175 in Malda’s Harishchandrapur and nearly 200 in Malda’s Mithipur. They are excellent honey collectors and experts in bamboo craft.

Unfortunately, large-scale beekeeping through man-made hives had an adverse impact on Bediya’s earning who would earlier collect honey from jungles and sell it while roaming the streets. People are now more drawn towards

smart and attractive packaging and Bediya don't have that expertise in branding their naturally collected honey. Also, they are not dressed well and people look at them with suspicion. Ultimately, over the years, they turned towards begging to survive.

" On November 22, 2003, the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (NCDNSNT) was set up by the ministry of social justice and empowerment. It was reconstituted on March 16, 2005 as the earlier commission could not make much headway in the welfare projects for the nomads. The commission assumed its functioning from February 6, 2006.

Purkayastha also pointed out that the Bediya don't have any documents like voter ID, Aadhaar, etc, to prove their identity. "It is surprising that very less initiative has been taken for their reforms.

Therefore, we have taken an initiative to ensure that they should have their identity cards and if possible we will try to connect them with honey-based units or with bamboo-craft workshops to prevent them from begging and to make them self-reliant. We came to know that when the issue of the National Register Citizens (NRC) was simmering, some of them were cheated as touts took money from them in the name of providing Indian citizenship. The matter came to our notice and we asked

them not to give any money to any such people,” he added.

According to late German anthropologist Aparna Rao, nomads make up around 7 per cent of the population of India. Mrinmoy Maitra, project coordinator of Praajak, who is also working on this project, said, “Like Bediya, nomads like Madaris are excellent street artistes who entertain people with performing monkeys and bears. Their communication skill is very good. Now there is a ban on monkey and bear dance but still they indulge in such practices in rural areas. They are excellent in understanding the emotions and psyche of animals. With basic training, why can't we hire them in the wildlife department? Or because of their communication skills, we can train them as delivery boys. If there is a will there's a way, but no one thought of that and they continued to live their life in penury.

So far we have encountered nearly 200 Madari families in Bengal but there are many more and we are yet to reach them.” The Sapuria or Sanpurey – who converted to Islam from the Hindu Bediya community – are mainly involved in snake charming and work as snake catchers. The Mal nomad community is into ayurvedic medicines. They prepare oil from scorpions which they bring from Rajasthan.

“We interacted with the Mal and Sanpurey community in Barasat in North 24 Parganas and in other parts of Bengal. We were impressed with their knowledge on ayurveda, herbs/medicinal plants, snake venom and other creature-based medicines. Their knowledge was underutilised and we thought about how to connect them with pharma companies who are into manufacturing of ayurvedic medicines,” Maitra said.

The researchers are involved in the skill-mapping of nomads like Behrupiya (impressionists in traditional performing arts), Sonajhuri (migrated from Nagpur to Kolkata and mainly into scavenging of gold dust) and Shah (acrobats and magicians) so that they can be trained similar to their traditional arts.

“We are focusing on educating their children because that is most necessary to bring them back to society. Since they roam from one place to another, fixing schooling is difficult for them. Therefore, we are giving training to one of them (having basic knowledge of primary education) and he was given the task to teach others even if they are roaming around,” Purkayastha said.