

Five return home from Indian jail

OUR CORRESPONDENT,
Benapole

Five Bangladeshis returned home from India on Friday on completion of their two and a half years' imprisonment in an Indian jail.

Indian Border Security Force (BSF) handed over the returnees to Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) through Benapole check post.

Nazrul Islam, commander of BGB camp at Benapole check post, said the five entered Indian territory without valid documents through Jessoror border in search of work two and a half years ago.

Indian police arrested them in Kolkata in 2014 for illegally entering the country.



A group of indigenous women reap paddy at Golabari Headman Para in Khagrachhari Sadar upazila on Monday last.

PHOTO: ANVIL CHAKMA

A journey without end

Bedey community seeks land for permanent settlement

HABIBUR RAHMAN with
ANDREW EAGLE

A very long time ago, in 1638 to be precise, a community mainly comprising ethnic Mong-tong from Arakan accompanied the fugitive king Ballal Raja to settle in the area of Munshiganj. It was the start of the journey of the contemporary Bedey people, who subsequently spread out to the remote corners of Bengal and Assam, many converting to Islam along the way. Traditionally nomadic, the wanderings of the Bedey have never ceased; but there are some who hope to find a permanent dwelling place.

"How can I go to school?" asks Subel Sarder, a 13-year-old Bedey. "We have to change our location regularly and it's not possible to study while living in such a way." He dreams of a formal education but as for many Bedeys it's an elusive dream.

"We have no chance to study," agrees Md Rian, 16, who has already started working with his parents. According to research by AKM Masud, the executive director of the organisation Grambanga Unnayan Committee, 69 percent of Bedeys never went to school and more than 95 percent cannot read or write, with the illiteracy rate among females at almost 100 percent. Around 98 percent of the 5-lakh strong Bedey community lives below the poverty line.

The term Bedey is believed to have arisen from the Bangla word "baiddha"

meaning village doctor; and the Bedey in general have pursued a variety of occupations centred on traditional healing practices. They are divided among nine groups, each roaming specific parts of the country, practising unique customs and specific traditional livelihoods.

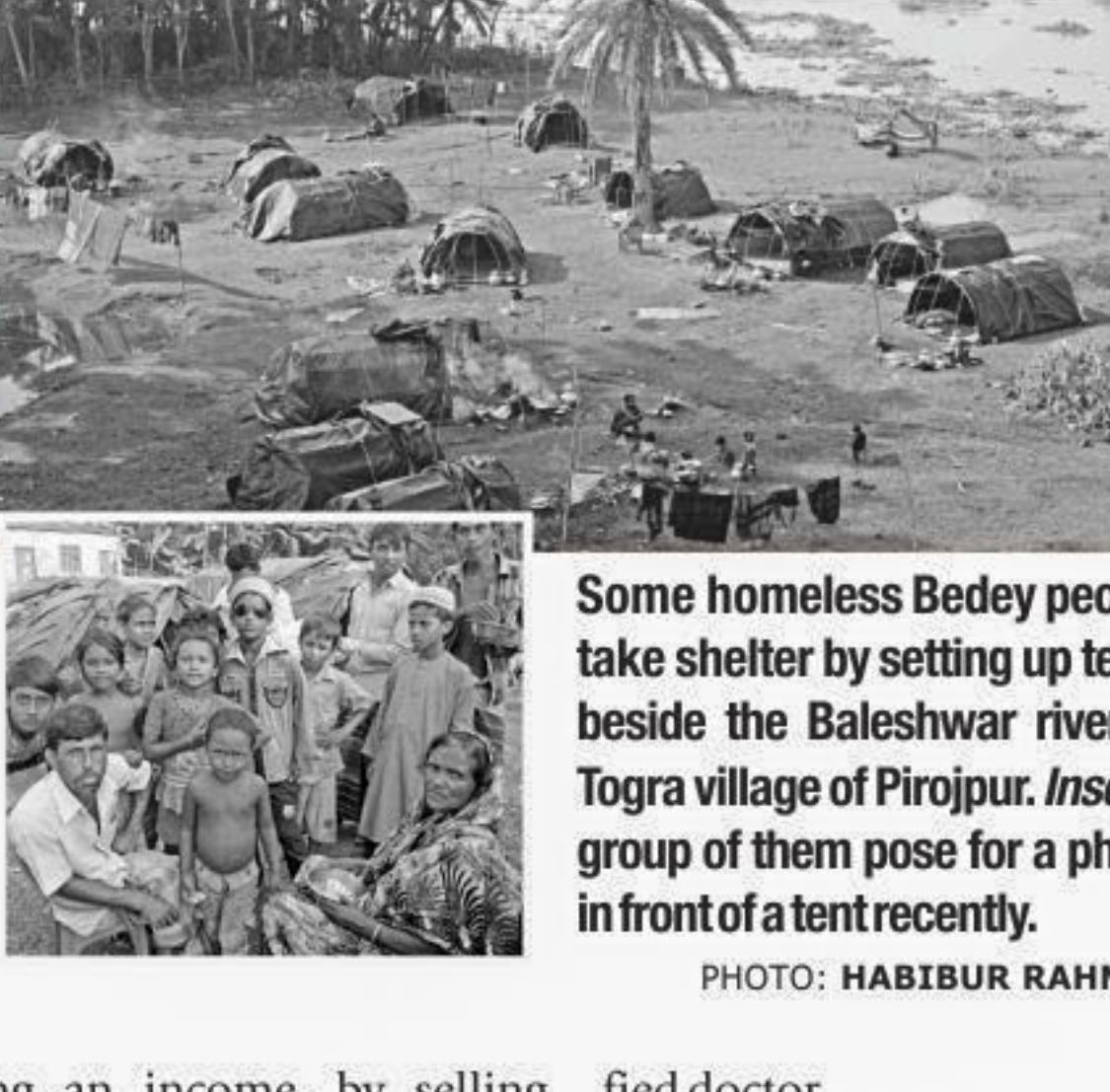
The Daily Star spoke with Bedeys based in Munshiganj while they were sheltering in 23 tents beside the Baleshwar River in Togra village of Pirojpur.

"We follow our forefathers' professions," says Sarwar. "But nowadays we can't earn enough because people's attitudes towards us have changed."

"After walking from dawn to dusk it has become difficult to earn Tk 200," says Shadina, 46, a woman among the group.

Bedey women, who are often the primary breadwinners, often walk more than twelve miles in a day. Bedey medical treatment commonly involves extracting "bad blood" with an instrument made of animal horn called a "singa". They sell amulets to protect against illness and evil, including plastic bangles and chains of catfish bone to be worn around the waist. They chant spells and sometimes extract "tooth worm" from troublesome teeth. A consultation costs up to Tk 50, though Bedeys are sometimes paid with paddy, rice or coconuts.

School-age Bedey kids often assist parents in earn-



Some homeless Bedey people take shelter by setting up tents beside the Baleshwar river in Togra village of Pirojpur. Inset, a group of them pose for a photo in front of a tent recently.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

ing an income, by selling amulets, catching snakes, performing acts of magic.

Lack of access to formal education is not the only disadvantage of a nomadic lifestyle. There are health consequences. Bedey births are often unregistered, with children unable to take the benefits of routine vaccinations. Child marriage is commonplace with girls often wed before they turn 14 and boys before 18, which results in the associated health risks of early pregnancy. By age 16, many Bedey women are mothers.

Due to their peripatetic lifestyle Bedeys often cook with and drink unsafe water, and knowledge of basic hygiene and nutrition are at a minimum. When sick the Bedey rarely consult a quali-

fied doctor.

But now some seek change, to live more as others do, in broader society. "Most of us don't like our traditional professions anymore," says Abdul Kader Sarder, leader of the group in Togra. "But we have nothing to do."

Across Bangladesh there are around 10,000 nomadic groups including the Bedey who on average travel, traditionally by boat, to around 90 locations during their 10 months of wandering a year. Around 90 percent of Bedeys own no land.

"If we had some land where we could settle," contemplates Abdul, "we could get involved in other jobs and leave our ancient professions. We could educate our children. But we are in need of help to get started."

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FULBARIA COLLEGE
Who'll look
after us?
Dead teacher's
daughter asks

OUR CORRESPONDENT,
Mymensingh

Teachers and students of Fulbaria Degree College in the district have demanded arrest and punishment of the perpetrators responsible for the death of two persons including a teacher of the institution on November 27.

They made the demand at a mourning rally on the college campus yesterday.

Abul Kalam Azad, 55, assistant professor of botany of the college and Safor Ali, 65, a passer-by, were killed as police swooped on the procession of the teachers and students who were demanding nationalisation of the college. Over 100 others were also injured in the attack on Sunday noon.

At yesterday's rally, deceased Abul Kalam Azad's elder daughter Samiha Azad Shochi said in a choked voice, "I demand punishment of the perpetrators and also nationalisation of the college, which was dream of my father."

"Who will take the responsibility of our family now? We want to meet with the prime minister to tell about the sufferings of our family following the tragic death of my father," said Samiha, an honours final year student of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology at Bangladesh Agricultural University.

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But rights groups and Rohingya refugees who have made it to Bangladesh have accused the military of killing civilians and razing entire villages as a form of collective punishment.

The Rohingya have long faced persecution and government restrictions on movement that many have likened to apartheid.

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