

FROM WATER TO LAND A NOMADIC EXISTENCE

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PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

14 Bede families have set up their oval-shaped makeshift tents on private land in Natun Torki, a village in Kalkini Upazila of Madaripur district. A branch of the Arialkha river flows on the west of Natun Torki. The area is well-known in Barishal for Torki Bandar, a narrow but flowing river on the west. The Bede huts are just on the outskirts of the crowded Natun Torki market.

Soud Khan, a Bede Sardar from Kharia in Munshiganj, and two other Bedes—Md Zakir Hossain and Md Nurun Nabi—guide me into their tents, many in the open space and some under the shade of a tree. It is a bright, sunny afternoon in June 29, 2018. Each tent seems to have everything a family needs, all crammed into a 100 to 150 square-feet space. Most tents are also fitted with solar panels. The tents facing west glow in the golden sunshine.

It is Friday, an off-day here. I inspect the tents and take photos in the daylight before finally sitting down for a chat with the elderly Bedes, surrounded by everyone of the little Bede community.

Md Zakir Hossain, in his late forties, informs me that all 14 families there had started their journey from Kharia in Munshiganj in October 2017. Since then they have set up their tents and set up businesses in 14 places!

Their journey through these months saw them moving through Shariatpur, Madaripur, Barguna, Jhalakathi and



Child being prepared for marriage



Most of the Bede boats in Kakalia disappears in 2018.

Barishal. Before coming to Natun Torki, they spent a month and ten days in the Doari Bridge area in Barishal.

"We stay in an area for as long as the business is good," says Hossain, admitting that the business is actually not that good anywhere. "We survive on minimal income and the scope of business dries out pretty quickly. So, we keep moving."

The 14 families are all Mal Manta, one of a dozen groups among the Bedes. One main business of the female Mal Bede is making use of *singe*, a metal pipe that sucks out bad blood from the human body to give relief from pain. Other businesses of Mal Bede include the search of lost gold, and sale of imitation ornaments, cosmetics, amulets, cups and other light utensils.

Hossain and his group plan to stay at Natun Torki for no longer than two weeks. They do not think business will be good here. I call Hossain some 20 days after I meet them to check if they have moved on.

"Yes, we are now at Haturia Launch Ghat in Goshairhat Thana under Shariatpur district," he tells me. "We stayed at Natun Torki for 15 days."

SPOTLIGHT

The life of the Bedes is tough indeed. "Because we are always on the run, our children cannot attend school," laments Rubina Akhtar, 45, explaining that none of the 25 children of the 14 families receive education.

"Many years back, Father Renato, a Catholic priest, used to assist us and had a school that would travel with us," recalls Rubina's husband Nurun Nabi, 55, who had been a teacher of the floating school. Nurun Nabi studied up to class ten and is ready to teach the Bede children again.

"Give us a school and a teacher," Rubina demands of me repeatedly. "We want education for our children." When I mention that Bangladesh reportedly has a 100 percent enrollment for children, Rubina shouts in disagreement. "It is a lie."

A large percentage of the Bede is on the move like these 14 families; and their children do not get any education. About 15 years ago, these groups used to glide through the country in boats. Their economic condition was better back

relief etc. is minimal.

FROM WATER TO LAND

Before visiting Natun Torki, we also spend hours at Torki Char Bede Palli. The hamlet is located on a half kilometer stretch on a western branch of the Arialkha river that snakes through Torki Bandar. The Bede hamlet, with its two-storey concrete and wooden houses, is neat and clean. Some houses, of course, reveal the poverty of the 60 families staying there. The shabbier houses are built like boats on plinths, perhaps in fond memory of their long-lost boats. The differences between the well-off and poorer Bede are clearly visible.

Md Nannu Sardar tells me that in addition to the 60 families settled on tiny plots of land purchased as far back as 25 years ago, another 60 to 70 families assembled here on boats for two months in October. Torki Char Bazar is home for them. Some families have small plots of land but they are yet to build houses.

For a month or two in October and November they relax, organise parties

1972. The river had a magnetic power. We would repair our boats here," recalls Md Jahangir, 65, who was the first to buy five decimals of land for Tk 40,000 back in the day.

"The local Gale (non-Bede Bangalee) offered to sell land to us," says Md Jahangir. Others followed Jahangir too.

The Manta of Torki Char Bede Palli in Gournadi Pourashava are all from Amanatganj, Barishal, and all are Muslims. They believe that they are different from Bedes of Dhaka Division and other areas. Soud Khan of Kharia in Munshiganj who accompanied us agrees. "I can see the Bede of Barishal are the homely kind," observes Khan.

The benefit of a permanent address is clear.

However, even after settling down, they face social difficulties with the Gale. "They look down upon us and do not want to socialise with us," says Nannu Sardar. "We pray in separate mosques and we do not mix with the Gale who envy our economic well-being."

Relations between the Bede and Gale



House of a poor Bede in Torki, Barishal.



A two-storied typical house of a well-to-do bede in Torki, Barishal.

PHOTOS: PHILIP GAIN

then. Now, none of them have a boat.

THE BEDE GEOGRAPHY

Grambangla Unnayan Committee, a non-profit organisation that works closely with Bedes, estimates that there are 5,000 Bede groups roaming around the country for 10 months around the year. Then they assemble at 75 locations in 39 districts. Normally, they get together during Eid-ul-Azha or national and local elections. Most of them were not allowed to vote until 2007. However,

a great percentage of Bede households do not have land or houses where they are registered as voters. They simply carry their tents everywhere.

According to a survey by the NGO, more than 90 percent of Bedes are illiterate. An overwhelming percentage live below the poverty line. Very few children are vaccinated. As they change locations often, they do not enjoy any government family welfare schemes or health assistance. Although they belong to the poorest of the poor and are landless, they hardly get *khas* land for settlement. Their access to safety net programmes such as old age allowance, VGF cards, disability allowance, flood

with singing and dancing, repair their boats, and settle social matters such as disputes and marriages. "About half of the 70 families who don't own houses and have their boats under repair set up tents," explains the Sardar (leader of the Bede hamlet). The hamlet grows lively with the assembled crowds.

But during business season, most working men and women go out to sell their business ware. Some women roam around with *singe* leaving the hamlet nearly empty. Beside the village, the river flows quietly—lifeblood of the wandering people, eager to settle down as agriculturists.

"But we have been able to purchase only tiny plots of land on which to build our houses," says Nannu Sardar, his strong features not once reveal his age of 75. "None of us have agricultural land."

This is a change they want now. "Once we settle down, our children can go to school," asserts Nannu.

Two of Sardar's friends—Md Jahangir and Md Abdur Rab—join us as we chat. They reminisce about their life 25 years back, when they all had boats. "We used to come here twice a year since

turned bitter after a fight two years ago.

Like the Bede who have settled in the Torki Bandar area, other Bede groups are also trying to settle on land. One such group is seen in Kakalia village in the Nagari union of Kaliganj upazila in Gazipur. Even a year and half ago, around 60 Bedes had boats beautifully lined up in the Turag river close to the Tongi-Ghorashal Highway. At one time, 200 boats would float in this part of the Turag, serving as a reminder of the river gypsy tradition in riverine Bengal.

But in July 2018, only eight boats were left. Quite a few of the awnings were set on the land close to the river. Others have disappeared from the river with signs of dilapidation around. Around 60 families have now built their houses on *khas* land on the Turag bank. The majority of the families have built tin shed houses, some with concrete floor. One family has constructed a two-storey home with a wooden deck—a typical house of a well-off Bede family. Others have set the awnings of their boats right on the banks of Turag.

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