

**BEYOND THE THIRD WORLD MARGINS: A STUDY OF THE
NOMADIC BEDE PEOPLE LIVING IN ASSAM** GITANJALI SINGH

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the socio-economic and existential condition of the nomadic peoples, particularly the Bede Muslims living in Assam. Often identified with the so-called water or river gypsies, these vagrant Bedes or snake-charmers do possess some gypsy attributes in their character and lifestyle. Historically came into the radar of cultural discourse in the 16th century, the nomadic peoples live in almost every part of the globe and they are named differently in different regions depending upon their profession, lifestyle, food habit, language, religious faith and geographical set up.

Key words: Colonialism, Third World, Fourth World, aboriginal, indigenous, tribal, nomadic, gypsy, Bede, Bediya, margins, blocs, Assam, India, Bangladesh.

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BEYOND THE THIRD WORLD MARGINS: A STUDY OF THE NOMADIC BEDE PEOPLE LIVING IN ASSAM

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The concept of different or multiple worlds (on political and economic basis) is a bi-product of European colonialism which has shattered and dismantled the geography, demography and economic cartography of the whole world. Colonialism has resulted into the creation of different political and economic blocs namely, First World, Second World and Third World. Since 1970s another virtual category in the name of 'Fourth World' has joined the league. Such a classification or more appropriately, such polarizations stand on the belief that the ones who are economically, industrially and militarily more advanced and powerful (at times hegemonic) are to be christened as First World (nations).

It is believed that the advancement or 'growth' of the so-called First World has become possible only by plundering the rest of the world which began with the genocide of the American or Australian aborigines, with the trade of the African slaves and, colonial conquest, the opium war and the bomb on Hiroshima in Asia (Roger Garaudy in AshisNandy, 1999: ix). Garaudy further observes that, 'underdevelopment' in the so-called underdeveloped (often labelled as Third World) countries is 'not a phenomenon of backwardness; it has been created by the growth of the West' (Nandy, x). AshisNandy too, believes that institutionalized or man-made suffering that exist in the peripheries of the world, is the result of the exploitation and oppression; and moreover, he argues that the concept of the 'Third world' is not a cultural category, it is rather a political and economic category, born of poverty, exploitation . . . [etc.] (Nandy, 21-22). There is no denying the fact that the European colonialism is responsible for the backwardness or underdevelopment of the major part of the globe including Asia, Africa and Latin America. The following analysis will help us understand how European colonialism and its residue Brown or Native colonialism is responsible for the creation of an excluded peripheral world which, in George Manuel's words, is inhabited by 'indigenous peoples descended from a country's aboriginal population and who today are completely or partly deprived of the right to their own territories and riches.' (cited in GAIA Atlas, 19)

Scholars opine that the term 'Fourth World,' though still used in the virtual sense, has acquired enough root to be considered as a distinct entity like that of First, Second or Third World. In a simple sense, Fourth World constitutes the most backward and peripheral regions of the world. Even the excluded aboriginal and unprivileged peoples living in the First World who are deprived of political power, economic and industrial benefits, and untouched by technological advancements, fashion and glamour are said to be living virtually in the Fourth World. This paper, however, deals with the most backward, deprived and socio-politically

excluded nomadic peoples living in this part of the globe categorically known as the Third World.

Historically, nomadic peoples and their lifestyles came into the radar of cultural discourse in the 16th century. Nomadic peoples live in almost every part of the globe and they are named differently in different regions depending upon their profession, lifestyle, food habit, language, religious faith and geographical set up. The term 'nomad' originated from French *nomade* and later from Greek *nomas* which means roaming about. Nomads are therefore, a community or a group of people who travel from one place to another for their livelihood. The nomadic peoples such as the Bedes or the snake-charmers, rustic/spiritual healers, conjurers, circus entertainers, jugglers, peddlers etc. by and large, do not have any political ties and stable location. The Bede people, since time immemorial, have been identified with the so-called water or river gypsies. The term gypsy, though sounds derogatory in the twenty first century purview, yet, it cannot be denied that these vagrant Bedes do possess some gypsy attributes in their character and lifestyle. In addition, their lifestyle seems quite similar to that of hunter-gatherers since they are not engaged in agricultural production; they are ready consumers at a minimal level and hardly have any contribution to the economy.

It is believed that in India, there are over sixty million people among hundreds of different tribes and sub-tribes who fall under the category of De-notified and Nomadic Tribes (DNT). However, their exact number is still unknown since there has not been any complete census on the nomadic population in particular. It is also perhaps difficult to conduct successful census on them as they are constantly on the move. There is no doubt that the nomadic people are not only excluded from the mainstream society but also they remain victims of social, political and economic discrimination. In olden times, before the introduction of railways (by the British in the colonial era) and the growth of business and transport industry, the nomadic people had their sustenance from a number of livelihood options from snake-charming, cattle rearing, natural or traditional healing, magic or monkey show, fortune telling to selling of petty items such as herbs, animal skins and oils, stones, bangles, trinkets etc. Their different sustainable livelihood options and income generation have somewhat dwindled these days. It is the colonialism or colonial rule that had calamitous effect on the nomadic population. Apart from the growth of transport industry including the railways which has endangered their trade and sustained livelihood by making goods, medicines and other items easily accessible to the public, the British colonizers, in the mid nineteenth century, came out with an Act, popularly known as Indian Forest Act (1865) through which they not only took the control of the forests and grasslands but also denied access to the tribes, nomadic and other semi-nomadic sub-tribes on the forests and pastures. The resistance by different tribes and other nomadic and semi-nomadic tribal communities to reclaim their authority over the forests and pastures against the colonial rulers, made them enemy of the British who once again came with the notorious Criminal Tribes Act (1871). Therefore, those tribes, sub-tribes and nomadic communities who were notified as 'criminals,' later became 'de-notified' after India's independence. The nomadic Bede community is one among several other 'de-notified' group of people who are yet to get government recognition for their uplifting and protection under

special tribes category. Since they have no official recognition, the Bedes are deprived of most of the civil rights including food, shelter, education, sanitation, healthcare etc.

Bede or Bediya (W. W. Hunter uses the latter term in his *Statistical Account of Assam*, 1879), mostly Muslims, are one such group among several other nomadic or semi-nomadic groups of people who have pastoral leanings, prefer to keep themselves away from the technologically advanced global industrial world symbolizing different wealth and power-driven territorial blocs as mentioned before. They are, no doubt, a marginalized group of people like any other secluded/excluded indigenous or aboriginal people living beyond the margins of the civil or corporate world divided into three well-known blocs: First, Second and Third World. If we look at the history and origin of the Bede people (living not only in Assam but also in both Bengals—in India and Bangladesh), we are encountered with several stories comprising of both facts and myths. Hunter describes the Bede or Bediya people as ‘a wandering jungle people, who live by fortune-telling, juggling, selling petty trinkets etc.’ (Hunter, 34). Edward Dalton too, in his *Tribal History of Eastern India* (1973), describes the Bede people as a gypsy tribe. It cannot, however, be denied that the Bede people are basically a nomadic group of people who have jungle or tribal and indigenous origin. Their tribal or indigenous origin is further supported by some anthropologists’ claim that the Bede people are descendents of the ethnic ‘Mong-tong’ tribe of Arakan region in Myanmar who ‘accompanied the fugitive king of Arakan, Ballal Raja’ in 1638 and later ‘settled in Bikrampur area near Dhaka.’ With the passage of time, most of them converted to Islam and subsequently they dispersed themselves throughout Bengal and Assam (Halder, *The Northern University Journal of Law*, 76-77). In Assam, they mostly settled at Lanka in Nagaon and Sonapur in Kamrup district. Quite interestingly, on the other hand, a section of these Bede people claim that they are descendents of a nomadic and indigenous Arab tribe called *Bedouin* from where the term ‘Bede’ or ‘Bediya’ came. However, there is no suitable historical or anthropological evidence available in support of this claim.

It will be no exaggeration if one says that the Bede people, (as stated in the caption of this paper), have a status of living beyond the margins of this part of the world, categorically called the Third World. Like the indigenous or aboriginal peoples who, besides living in the First or Second World, who are untouched by the so-called civilization, development, science and technology and most importantly, are excluded from the mainstream society to be categorized as the people of the Fourth World, the Bede people too are of no exception. Found in both India and Bangladesh, the Bede community live most of their lives either in river boats or tents shifted constantly as they travel from one place to another to earn their livelihood. Since they do not have any stable location, land or house of their own, they have no political ties. The comings and goings of different political regimes have no affect on them since most of them cannot exercise their votes, as neither their names are enlisted in the register of voters nor are they interested in politics. Even the poorest of the poor who is not a nomadic Bede and has a tiny hut of his/her own on his/her own piece of land, besides having a hand to mouth existence, is still fortunate enough compared to the pathetic standard of living and vulnerable existence of these Bede peoples. During field study before writing this article, the writer of this

paper personally met dozens of peoples (at different locations) belonging to Bede community either living in their tiny bow shaped tents made of straw, abandoned polythene or tarpaulin on the damp riverside, beside railway tracks or in rented sheds in the dingy outskirts of a town. One among them called himself BaharUddinBodal who has been living in his present tent at Katigorah, Cachar, Assam since last couple of months, describes their misery in the following way:

We are very poor, babu. We are accepted neither by the society nor by the government since we are treated as untouchable vagabonds. We move from place to place to earn something to feed our children. We have no house, no land, and no fixed location. We also wish to have houses of our own, educate our children, avail government facilities and live a life of dignity. If we fear the summer heat, torrential rain or winter cold, then who will feed us? Hunger compels us to move on and on. (BaharBodal)

As he called his six year old daughter Hajera to bring some papers wrapped in a polythene bag, a wry smile of content ran on his dry lips. He took out a brown, dusty page of a local Bengali newspaper and proudly showed his photograph published in that paper as if he possessed a great treasure. He has fathered three children: one son and two daughters. He claims that they have been living in Assam for generations and his forefathers used to live in river-boats. Originated mostly from Assam's Nagaon and Kamrup districts, these people are currently spread over almost all parts of Assam. Their group consisting of approximately twenty five in number, living in five huddled tents, claim that they came from Lanka, a small town in Nagaon district of Assam and have travelled almost all parts of the state. Bahar's son, however, does not want to come to his father's nomadic snake-charming, natural/spiritual healing and missing jewellery retrieving profession. His father has a *hunsa* (a triangular basket) and an *asra* (a rake-like instrument with a long pole) used to retrieve missing jewellery from ponds and rivers. He has taken another profession and drives an auto rickshaw on hire basis and from which he registers better earning unlike his fifty six year old father.

Fifty two year old Tahera Begum, clad in a two-part garment resembling a saree who stays along with her group in one of the clustered sheds of an abandoned factory at Poamara in the outskirts of Karimganj, has almost similar yet different story to share. Having their roots at Lanka in Nagaon district of Assam, they have been staying in these broken, dripping sheds in an unhygienic condition for last ten to twelve years. A dozen half-naked children between five to twelve years of age can be seen either playing some strange games or squatting on the muddy edges of their sheds with some aluminium or steel utensils. When asked whether their children go to school, Tahera informs rather shyly that their children do not go to school. Instead of receiving any formal education (for which they have a very limited chance too), their children instinctively acquire knowledge about their parents' profession: the art of snake-charming, blowing the special flute or *shinga* in order to charm a snake, treating snake-bites and other animal bites, healing tooth ache and body ache etc. by chanting *mantras* or massage (the Bedes are said to be good masseurs) and exorcism, selling various herbs, oils, stones, animal skins etc. They get trained with these arts and performances as they grow up. Illiteracy among the Bede people is highly alarming. More than eighty percent of the nomadic Bede or Bediya people

reportedly cannot read and write. Whereas it is somewhat difficult for these people to enrol their children in schools since they are always on the move—they camp for a few weeks at one place and then shift to some other place for their trading mission which is also called *gawal*. Even those who have stayed for several years at one place like that of Tahera's group are still reluctant to enrol their children in schools. Perhaps, they are afraid that their children will be looked down upon since they are considered as outcasts and untouchables. They are said to be omnivorous and other than claiming to be the followers of Islam, majority of them have great adoration for *Devi Manasha*, the goddess of snakes worshipped mainly in Bengal and perform various other rites similar to the Hindus. Hence, they feel themselves excluded from both Hindu and Muslim society. Besides education, healthcare is another crucial issue concerning the Bedes. They are generally deprived of proper healthcare and medical facilities as most of the time in a year they are on the move, living in temporary tents. Their children do not get immunized or vaccinated against numerous deadly diseases and hence, remain malnourished and vulnerable to diseases like poliomyelitis, hepatitis, tuberculosis etc. However, the Bedes apply their own traditional or spiritual method of treatment in the event of their or their children's illnesses.

The Bede people live in scattered groups in different parts of Assam. From Margherita to Mankachar, Barpeta to Badarpur, Koliabor to Karimganj, Sonitpur to Silchar, Kaziranga to Kathaltoli, Lanka to Latu, Sarupathar to Solgoi, they can be found in every nook and corner of the state. Each Bede group consists of twenty to twenty five people including women and children. Majority of them, as mentioned before, live in temporary tents shifted constantly as they move on; while others live in rented thatched huts or semi-pucca sheds of abandoned industries or factories in the vicinity of small country towns or high river-banks in the outskirts of urban or semi-urban areas. They are called in different names by different people living in different places. Other than Bede or Bediya, they are also popularly known as Sapure (snake-charmers), Gadwal or Gawal, Bodal, Mal etc. The Bedes, in spite of living as scattered groups, live as a community under a *sardar* or head. They are fond of music and *yatra* or theatre. The most popular movie among the Bedes is *BederMeyeJosna* (1991), an Indo-Bangladesh joint venture, directed by Motiur Rahman.

It is worthwhile to mention here that the Bede community are mostly affected by the introduction of different laws such as Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1960) and Wildlife Protection Act (1972). Since the enforcement of these laws, they are no longer able to entertain people with live snakes or other animals which generated them some good earnings. They are now shifting to some other professions and their nomadic characteristic is also under drastic change. They are taking cheap houses in rent located in the outskirts of towns and cities, mostly in dingy areas and work as daily wage earners, rickshaw pullers, auto drivers, helpers in masonry, brick industry, construction works etc. At the present circumstances they are losing their nomadic character because, with the passage of time and with the change of the nature of their professions and corresponding demand in their customers/consumers, they are changing themselves drastically and this paradigm shift in their profession, lifestyle and overall existence is making them semi-settled.

Bedes use to travel and trade throughout the year until recently since past ten to fifteen years, they have been engaged with several other professions which have compelled them to settle temporarily at different places. This temporary settlement, however, does not allow them to avail any government facility or schemes which demand production of several documents which most of them, unfortunately, do not possess. Most importantly, either they are unaware of their civil and political rights or are meticulously sidelined and excluded from the mainstream society that, majority of them cannot exercise their right to vote since their names, as mentioned before, are not enlisted in the Register of Voters. Assam has seen several agitations, turmoil and even riots regarding the issue of foreigners and in such circumstances, who will come forward and take initiatives in enlisting their names in the National Register of Citizens (NRC) currently underway? Another difficulty lies before such an initiative is that, since the Bedes are nomadic people and roam about nine months in a year while majority of them are now living a semi-nomadic and unsettling semi-settled life at different locations throughout the state without any land or legal documents and proof of citizenship. Moreover, even though they have a history of living in Assam for several centuries, but their language (as they speak a Bengali dialect) and religion (as most of them claim themselves to be followers of Islam) will encourage a section of people of the state having narrow political and nationalist interests to keep them away from the mainstream so that the former's exclusion will make the latter enjoy more share of benefits from the government and society. Already being excluded from the mainstream society, the nomadic Bede people need no further exclusion or marginalization.

The foregoing analysis shows that, like any other nomadic and semi-nomadic, tribal and indigenous groups, the Bede or Bediya people are an impoverished and socio-economically excluded group of people living in the periphery, or in other words, living in a world beyond the margins of the Third World. It is a world virtually designated as Fourth World, too backward and marginalized where the so-called civilization, development, science and technology have remained a distant dream. It is, therefore, highly demanding that these nomadic people should get proper attention from the government and NGO support for rehabilitation and other welfare measures so that they can become valuable and productive members of the mainstream society.

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