

THE NOMADIC BEDE COMMUNITY AND THEIR MOBILE SCHOOL PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the paper is to document and analyze the state of education and poverty in the nomadic Bede community and to discuss about mobile school intervention for creating access to education opportunities for the children of the socially excluded and stigmatized Bede community. Bede, a nomadic community and is regarded as “Water Gypsy” or “River Gypsy” in Bangladesh. Nomadic Bede community has a different culture than the other ethnic groups in Bangladesh. Identity as Bede always carries stigma and discrimination for them so they preferred not to be identified as Bede in the society. The mainstream people of Bangladesh considers Bedes as a culturally polluting agent in the society and a lower caste like Hindu caste system.

According to a recent estimate Bedes are 800,000 in number and they roam around Bangladesh dividing in around 5,000 nomadic groups. About 98 percent Bedes live below poverty line. Only 2 percent Bede children got the opportunity to be immunized against vaccine preventable deadly diseases. More than 90 percent Bedes still could not enlist themselves in the voter list since they are nomad and they don't have any house on land. Bedes who live on boat have to defecate and urinate in the river water. At the same time they have to bathe and wash utensils in the same river water. Bedes have to live either in small boats or tents so the average per capita living space enjoyed by the Bedes is much less than the slum people i.e. 10 square feet. Access to energy e.g. electricity and gas by the poor reduces poverty. Almost 100 percent of the 0.5 million nomadic Bedes are deprived of access to energy i.e. access to electricity and gas. Almost all the Bede female children and adolescents get married usually at the age of 10-14 years. According to Bedes there is a remarkable decrease in demand of their traditional products and services so they are facing difficulties in livelihood.

More than 90 percent population of Bede community is highly mobile. The children of the Bede fleets who move rapidly from one place to another are not able to receive education from any government primary school or NGO school. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Millennium Development Goals, the constitution of Bangladesh and the compulsory primary education act all these documents are in favor of education of each of the children of Bangladesh but still more than 95 Bede children are out of education opportunities. The most important achievement of the mobile school program is to develop an innovative way of creating access to education for a community who were excluded from education opportunities because of their nomadic pattern of live and livelihood. Under this program boat schools accompany the nomadic Bede groups. Each school is managed by a Bedes group which is called as mobile school management committee. All females and males of a Bede fleet are member of the school management committee. Currently 315 students are studying in 11 mobile schools. Recently a UNESCO publication described the mobile school as one of the best instance of inclusive education in Bangladesh. Although only 11 mobile schools could do a little for educating this community but now many of the nomadic groups of Bedes think that even being a nomad getting education is possible. Mobile schools have not only educated many of the students of this community but also have shown a way of creating education opportunities in a pragmatic and innovative way for a gypsy like nomadic and marginalized group in Bangladesh.

1. Introduction, Background and Justification

Bede, a nomadic community and is regarded as “Water Gypsy” or “River Gypsy” or “Nomadic People”. Dalton in his brief report mentions *Bede* as a gypsy-like tribe.¹ Anthropologist H.K.S. Arefeen mentioned “*Bede*” as a marginalized Muslim community in Bangladesh perspective.² Wise calls the *Bedes* “bands of vagrants...who correspond to the gypsies of Europe”.³ The community give rational explanation of the term “*Bede*” and defend their Arab origin on the basis of similarity with the Arabic word “*Bedouin*”. Though Banglapedia mentioned them as descendents of ‘*Montong*’ tribe of Myanmar. *Bedes* are engaged in the snake charming, catching of snakes, curing snake-bites, selling of snakes, traditional and spiritual healing services, magic show and monkey show, selling of bangles and trinkets.

¹ Dalton, Edward T., 1978 *Tribal History of Eastern India*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications.

² Arefeen, H.K.S. 1992. *Sub-culture: Society of Bangladesh, Samaj Nirikhan*, Vol.46. Samaj Nirikhan Kendra, Dhaka

³ Wise, James, 1883, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Traders of Eastern Bengal*. Volume 2. London: Harrison & Son

According to their own estimate they were 1.5 million in number in 1987 living in Bangladesh⁴. According to a recent estimate⁵ *Bedes* are 800,000 in number in Bangladesh. Around 5,000 nomadic groups roam around Bangladesh round the year and they gather for two months in an area. A survey⁶ reported about 65 prominent areas where *Bedes* come for yearly gathering and some of the *Bedes* have purchased some land to settle there.

2. Background and Justification

Nomadic Bede community has a different culture than the other ethnic groups in Bangladesh. So the cultural diversity is the prime constituent of the nomadic *Bedes*' identity in Bangladesh. The diversity of cultural realities of the nomadic *Bedes* was never taken into consideration in development strategies in Bangladesh though UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity proclaims that "Cultural diversity is one of the driving forces of development". *Bedes* are around 500,000 in Bangladesh. More than 95 percent *Bedes* are still illiterate. About 98 percent *Bedes* live below poverty line. Only 2 percent *Bede* children got the opportunity to be immunized against vaccine preventable deadly diseases. More than 90 percent *Bedes* still could not enlist themselves in the voter list since they are nomad and they don't have any house on land. Govt., UN Agencies, NGOs have launched numerous programs for the poor and marginalized people but almost no development program was launched for the socially excluded and stigmatized *Bede* Community.

More than 90 percent population of *Bede* community is highly mobile. The children of the fleets who move rapidly from one place to another are not able to receive education from any government primary school or NGO school. The school teachers of government primary schools do not want to enroll and to provide books to the *Bede* children because the teachers know that within two months *Bedes* have to leave for traveling as a nomad for a ten months' journey across Bangladesh and/or India.

Bedes have some skills, which are related to traditional healing services, entertainment services, petty trading etc. but their traditional services and products are now losing market demand. Since *Bedes* are nomadic and traditionally lived on water so this community does not have any control over land and local or national political power.

Almost all the *Bedes* are not included in the voter list of Bangladesh because they are nomadic and they do not have any land tax certificate and SSC certificate. Since they are not voters of a constituency or a local government body e.g. Union Parishad or Municipality so they are deprived to raise their issues in the local or national policy level for advocacy.

Bedes are not counted as an ethnic group in census by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) so they are deprived to be benefited from the programs which are launched for ethnic minorities or marginalized groups in Bangladesh. Though everybody acknowledge the cultural diversity of the *Bedes* and their special identity but absence of official recognition unable them to establish their special needs for education and health and deprives them from establishing their rights as a citizen.

The *Bede* community is severely deprived from all types of basic necessities of life e.g. food, shelter, education, medical care, etc. Though many researchers worked on the culture of the *Bede* community but until 1999 no research was done on the development crisis of this community. Realizing the needs to conduct an exploratory research, Grambangla Unnayan Committee with financial assistance from Program for Research on Poverty Alleviation (PRPA), Grameen Trust/Grameen Bank initiated a research to explore the human development situation

⁴ Rahman, Habibur, 1990, *The Shandar-Bede Community of Bangladesh: A Study of A Quasi-Nomadic People*. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. University of Dhaka. Dhaka: Bangladesh.

⁵ Maksud A.K.M. (2006). *Participatory Action Research for Human Development of Nomadic Bede Community*, Grambangla Unnayan Committee and Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB), Dhaka.

⁶ Maksud, AKM, 2002, *Prospects and Possible Interventions and Potentials for Sustainable Development in Bede Community*, Grameen Trust, Dhaka.

in Bede community and to find their crises in development. The findings of the study suggested strong needs for implementing intervention programs in the field of education, capacity building, health, human rights etc. in such a way so that *Bede* community have increased access to these basic necessities of life. It should be mentioned here Bedes are excluded from any development intervention both by the government and the NGOs. Based on the findings of that study⁷ an action research was designed and approached to Research Initiatives, Bangladesh for assistance. Considering the importance to innovate an intervention model for inclusion of these socially excluded *Bede* community into human development process Research Initiatives, Bangladesh extended its technical and financial assistance to Grambangla Unnayan Committee to conduct a participatory action research. In that participatory action research project developing a mobile school model was the prime objective.

Many research works were done on the *Bede* community but no research work could find a way for changing or initiate a change process in this community. But after initiating this participatory action research initiative supported and promoted by Research Initiatives, Bangladesh has certainly initiated a change process in this community and now Bedes find a hope for positive change in their live.

3. Objective of the project

The objective of the paper is to document and analyze the state of education and poverty in the nomadic Bede community and to discuss about mobile school intervention for creating access to education opportunities for the children of the socially excluded and stigmatized Bede community.

4. Methodology

The research started with an exploratory research phase, in which it was tried to gain insight in the research problem by investigation. In this phase survey, in-depth interview and group discussion techniques were followed to collect data. After the exploratory phase the methods of participatory action research was applied to explore more information on poverty, human deprivation and social exclusion of the Bede community. Through this participatory action research the research team experimented an intervention strategy i.e. mobile school that addressed the need of education of the nomadic children. During participatory action research, group discussion and participant observation techniques were used for data collection.

Participatory Action Research, that is, study and action combined that respond to the needs of the underprivileged masses in contemporary social structures, by taking into account their own aspirations and needs, as well as their capacities for knowing and acting.⁸ The participatory approach argues that the only way the poor can overcome their difficulties is by directly participating in the process of development including formulation of social policy, development programs, their implementation at the ground level and sharing in the benefits of such programs. The participatory approach has the dual goal of promoting growth and equity while also ensuring the development of democratic processes in the grassroots.⁹ In this action research project the participation of the *Bede* community was ensured at every stage of designing and implementation of this project.

In this Participatory Action Research (PAR) project the animators facilitated to take place series of meetings in Bede community on the burning issues of their life e.g. education, livelihood security, gender disparity, water and sanitation, voting and citizenship rights, land rights etc. Two

⁷ Maksud, AKM, 2002, *Prospects and Possible Interventions and Potentials for Sustainable Development in Bede Community*, Grameen Trust, Dhaka.

⁸ Fals-Borda, Orlando (2000). The Challenge of action research. In Rahman, Md. Anisur (eds.) (2000). *Participation of the Rural Poor in Development*. Dhaka. p.132.

⁹ Silva, K.T., and Athukorala, K. (1996), 'South Asia: An overview', in E Yen. S.A. Samad and S.M. Miller (eds.) *Poverty : a global Review*. Hand book as Poverty Research, Scemdinavian University press. Oslo, and UNESCO, Paris, 65-85.

types of Animators were involved in this PAR e.g. External Animator and Internal Animator. The Advisor, Principal Researcher, Field Research Officer and Mobile School Supervisors worked as External Animators and the mobile school teachers, trainers and community leaders worked as Internal Animator. The animators participated in those meetings and facilitated the process of conscientization of Bedes and ultimately through collective self-reflection on their experiences and problems, they became more aware of the dimensions of their reality and they implemented innovative initiatives in favour of transforming their own life in a positive direction.

5. Duration of PAR

The exploratory research started in September 1999 and ended in August 2000. The participatory action research project started in November, 2002 and ended in October, 2005.

6. Project location

The exploratory research was conducted in 5 Bede locations where they gather once in a year for two months and the participatory action research was conducted with 7 nomadic Bede groups. These nomadic Bede groups traveled more than 90 spots in a year through 5-20 districts. The researchers stayed for at least 5 days with each of the nomadic Bede groups in a month.

7. Poverty Situation in Bede Community

Education: A large majority of the children (95%) can not attend schools because they stay all the months of a year with their parent outside home, and travel from one place to another. So *Bedes* have to be excluded from the government's intervention to ensure universal primary education for the children and no government and NGO intervention is found to reach this nomadic group for education. Because of illiteracy *Bedes* can not enjoy the freedom to choose any other profession except the hereditary and traditional ones.

Health: Poor health retains the poor in poverty, and poverty retains them in poor health. *Bede* children who roam around the county with their parents on boat fail to avail the opportunity of getting vaccinated and health services. According to a recent assessment by Grambangla Unnayan Committee it was found that only two percent *Bede* children were immunized against seven deadly diseases. According to that assessment it was also revealed that less than five percent *Bede* women received TT during their last pregnancy.

During menstrual period *Bede* women can not go for earning at least for 5-7 days. If they walk too much during these days they face excessive bleeding and they also suffer from effects of evil air (*Batas* or *Alga Dos*) during this time. But to fulfill their daily needs even during these days *Bede* women have to walk for 10-15 kilometers for earning.

Lack of awareness and health education increases the risk of getting diseases especially communicable diseases in *Bede* community. An estimate shows that death rate from communicable diseases among the age group 5-14 of the poorest 20 percent of the global population is 67 times higher than that of the richest 20 percent of the global population.¹⁰ The situation of *Bede* community indicates that the health seeking process and causes of death in this community must be more frustrating than any other socially excluded and deprived ethnic groups in Bangladesh.

Nutrition and food security: *Bedes* belong to the lowest earning group so they become severely stricken by the price hike of daily consumer products. During the flood in 2004 almost all *Bedes* had to stay on their boats without having any chance to earn through selling goods and services because all the areas and roads were under water. Thus *Bedes* had to fall in severe food shortage for at least two months with their children and old people. Moreover, according to the *Bedes* their economic situation has drastically deteriorated during the last 35 years. So

¹⁰ Gwatkin, D.R. (2001), "Poverty and Inequalities in Health within developing countries: filling the information gaps", *Poverty, Inequality and Health*, Oxford University Press, London.

hunger is a good friend of Bedes who never leaves them. This situation entails malnutrition in fetal life or infancy and leads to stunting of both physical and intellectual growth of the future generation of the Bedes. As a consequence of this constant deteriorating economic situation the nutritional status of the *Bede* community is aggravating like the other poor, deprived and socially excluded communities in Bangladesh.

Lack of opportunity for savings: Bedes do not have the opportunity to save money in the banks since they are illiterate and they do not dare to go for open a bank account. They save money in a secret place of their boats. Many Bedes' saving have been eaten by the rats. Sometimes they save money in the earthen banks but their children break those banks and eat snacks with that money when their parents go out for earnings.

Water and sanitation: One remarkable problem in *Bede* community is water and sanitation. Those who live on a boat have to defecate and urinate in the river water. This practice of 0.5 million *Bede* people enormously and unrestrictedly pollutes the environment of Bangladesh. So excreta deposited in the open environment by this community may not be less than 250 metric tons in a day. At the same time they have to bathe and wash utensils in the same river water. Sometimes local people physically torture the whole *Bede* group for pollution their water and environment. When Bedes travel from place to places they always face difficulties in collecting safe drinking water.

Shelter: Research findings show that still more than 90 percent have no house on the land. An assessment shows that the average per capita living space enjoyed by the poor of Dhaka is only 30 square feet.¹¹ Since *Bedes* have to live either in small boats or tents so the average per capita living space enjoyed by the *Bedes* is much less than the slum people i.e. 10 square feet.

Usury as a primitive mode of exploitation: Bedes do not have land, so they can not apply for Bank loan or NGO microcredit. Most of the people of the *Bede* community borrow money in their need from the local "*Mohajan*" i.e. local creditors or usury. They have to pay around 10 percent interest in a month for borrowing money.

Risks and Vulnerability: *Bedes* often get jeopardized during the rough weather. Due to storms, heavy rains and wind their boats sometimes get drowned in the river. Since they live on small and unsafe boats, they are at risk of drowning of their children into water. Most of the pieces of land on those *Bedes* settled are on the bank of the river. So river erosion destroys a good number of *Bede* households every year.

Access to public resources: The total amount of *khas* land and *khas* water bodies in Bangladesh is nearly 3.3 million acres. But 88.5 percent of the agricultural *khas* lands are illegally occupied by the rich and powerful in Bangladesh.¹² For *Bede* community no incidence was found where a nomadic *Bede* was allocated *khas* land for rehabilitation. During the last devastating flood in 2004 they also did not receive any relief materials or assistance from any source except one exception in Louhajanj.

Loss of biodiversity: A large number of *Bedes* live on snake related trading e.g. snake catching and snake selling. The presence of snakes reduces crop damage by the rats in the crop fields. Snake catching by the *Bedes* without creating any scope for snake reproduction causes loss of different species of snakes and is creating an imbalance in the ecosystem. Snake catchers already facing difficulties in collecting snakes from the forests of Bangladesh because of deforestation and excessive catching of snakes from forests. Eventually their earnings from snake trading reduced.

Diminishing Market Demand for Services and products Provided by Bedes: Bedes reported that there is a remarkable decrease in demand of their products and services so they are facing difficulties in earning and they believe that the demand for their professional services will extinct within a short time. Rapid development in literacy, available and affordable scientific health care

¹¹ Department of Social Services, Government of Bangladesh and Resource Planning and Management Consultants (Pvt.), *A Review of Existing Services Relating to Street Children (Rajshahi, Bogra and Rangpur)*, ARISE, Dhaka.

¹² Barkat, Abul, Shafique uz Zaman, Selim Rahim, (2001), *Political economy of Khas land in Bangladesh*, ALRD, Dhaka.

services, entertainment services through satellite channels and VCR caused rapid reduction in demand of traditional services provided by the Bedes.

Access to Energy Resources: Access to energy e.g. electricity and gas by the poor reduces poverty. Almost 100 percent of the 0.5 million nomadic *Bedes* are deprived of access to energy i.e. access to electricity and gas because they are nomads though 30 percent of the households in Bangladesh have access to electricity and 3 percent of the kitchens in Bangladesh have access to gas. Rural Electricity Program (REP) provides the necessary infrastructure (economic, socio-cultural and political) for achieving real freedom – freedom from servitude to nature, ignorance, poverty, dogmatic beliefs and even from other people.¹³ But because of the nomadic pattern of live Bedes have no access to Rural Electricity Program.

Illegal Seasonal Migration and Violation of Human rights: A large number of *Bedes* migrate - without any passport - seasonally to India for earning their livelihood. In February, 2003 the Indian Border Security Forces (BSF) started to push-in around 5,000 people in Bangladesh among them, 41 families (213 children, women and men) were *Bedes*. So bedes more often become tortured by the border security forces and sometimes they imprison Bedes.

Gender Disparity: *Bede* women usually walk around 10 miles a day for their professional earning. Women work harder and longer than the men of this community. Although the *Bede* women earn for their families, but in decision making their role is negligible. In *Bede* community no women inherit paternal property. Rafique, a *bede* man who had to give birth 7 daughter with the hope of getting a son so that his son can inherit their property otherwise after their death all the property will be owned by his brothers. Once Rafique eloped with another lady with the hope of getting a son leaving his wife who has give birth to 7 daughters. In this community no marriage is registered with a government approved marriage registrar. Marriage and divorce is decided by the Sardar. These traditions cause major violence against women. *Bede* women do not have any guardianship over their children after divorce.

Identity and Stigma: In group discussion sessions *Bedes* argued that identity as *Bede* always carries stigma and discrimination for them so they preferred not to be identified as *Bede* in the society. It has become evident from the findings that *Bedes* are gradually losing their identity. A major portion of the *Bede* community informed that the Bengali people misbehave with the *Bede* people when they meet them for business purpose. The mentioned reasons for such misbehavior or hatred is the identity of *Bede*, i.e. a different type of community with low prestige and social value and with the lack of social support from the community where they temporarily stay. It is obvious that the Bengali community considers *Bedes* as a culturally polluting agent in the society and a lower caste like Hindu caste system. *Bede* women do not maintain 'Purdah' like the Bengali Muslim women so *Bede* women are hated as unchaste women by the Bengali community.

Power, participation and self-governance: *Bedes* are more than 500,000 in number and around 250,000 *Bedes* are eligible to be voters but they even fail to be elected as a Union Parishad member which requires only 1,000 votes. So far only one of them has been elected at Union Parishad level. To become a voter in a local voters-list one has to own a household in a certain area or to bear a land tax certificate from a local government institution, i.e. Union Parishad or municipality. More than 90 percent of the *Bedes* are not voters in Bangladesh because they do not own homestead or bear any land tax certificate. Another thing makes them unable to be voter because the local Bengali Union Parishad Chairman and members do not want to include *Bedes* into voter list. Bengali local elected representatives think that if the *Bedes* are included in the voters list at a large number then they will be unable to be elected in the union parishad election and *Bedes* will win in the election.

Marriage in *Bede* Community: Almost all the *Bede* female children and adolescents get married usually at the age of 10-14 years. Early marriage is a serious problem in *Bede* community. After divorce *Bedes* do not have to pay any subsistence allowance to his wife or his

¹³ Todaro, M. (1994), Economic Development in the Third World.

children. After divorce the father have the right to take away all the children from his wife according to Bede law.

Gambling: Male persons of the Bedes like very much to gamble. During the two months of gathering almost all the male persons gamble. Sardars and some rich Bedes who have own land build some "Macha" (bamboo made sitting place which is somewhat raised with the pillars of bamboo) for renting those as gambling place. During this time the male persons gamble with the money especially with the earnings of their wives. Sometimes some male persons have to borrow money or have to mortgage his/her asset, gold or even boat for gambling. As a rule the looser have to pay all the money before leaving that place.

Human Security: Sometimes the villagers do not allow the Bedes to anchor in their land because they know that after anchoring the Bedes will pollute the surrounding environment through defecating in the open places both on land and in water. There are many evidences when Bedes were beaten by the villagers because of polluting environment through defecation. Bedes are often physically tortured by the settlers when they go to collect fuel-wood from the neighboring areas. More often children of the Bedes play nearby area where their boats anchor. As a result of playing on the nearby land sometimes the crops of the settlers get damaged and because of that crop damage the settlers sometimes beat them and their children.

8. Mobile School of the nomadic Bede Community for their Children

It is enshrined in the Article 26.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be free." But still in Bede community almost all of them are illiterate. In each of the nomadic *Bede* groups there are many children but there are no facilities for education within the group. Therefore, they have to accept their hereditary occupation (*Jati Babsha*). During the Participatory Action Research (PAR) project seven mobile schools were established in seven nomadic *Bede* groups, which roam around the country in boats. Since these groups change around 90 spots in a year and do not stay more than 3-4 days in one spot, so the schools were established in boats. These mobile schools not only eradicated illiteracy but also proved that it is possible for a nomad to have access to education. Now this mobile school model has been established, many donors, charity organizations and individual persons are willing to help eradicate illiteracy in the *Bede* community. The most important achievement of these research projects is to develop an innovative way of creating access to education for a community who were excluded from education opportunities because of their nomadic pattern of live and livelihood. Each school is managed by a *Bedes* PAR group which is called as school management committee. All females and males of a Bede fleet are member of the school anagement committee. In 7 mobile schools 185 students studied and 47 students has already transferred to the government primary school and residential Madrasha. Currently 315 students are studying in 11 mobile schools.

Early Childhood Care and Development Centres: With 11 schools now 11 ECCD centres have been established following the Save the Children USA and Kajoli Model Shishi Bikash Kendra model. At beginning of the introducing mobile schools some students used to fail to attend in the school because they have to look after his or her younger brothers and sister staying at their own boats when their mothers have to leave early in the morning for earning. So now the mobile school teachers encourage all the students to bring their younger brothers and sisters with them if they are given responsibility to look after them sitting at their boats. So one may observe that during school hours some children of 2-3 years are sitting in the mobile schools, playing with toys and educational materials. For a successful mobile school program it is needed to arrange training on parenting. During the program in each month a parents meeting is arranged so that the parents help in the learning process of their children.

Teachers' Training: It's very difficult to find a person who passed the SSC or HSC in *Bede* groups. Most of the persons who studied up to class III-IV and have already forgotten what they have learnt in the school because they could not engage themselves in such a profession where

reading and writing was always practiced. So it was felt to train the appointed teachers more frequently. Before initiating mobile school, teachers were imparted a 5 days, basic training and 2 days refreshers' training in every 3 months.

Mode of Mobile School Program Operation: This mobile school program now have guidelines how a mobile school will be operated within a cluster of fleets. A comprehensive operational manual has already developed to implement the mobile school and training activities for the teachers. In this manual many things have been addressed e.g. roles and responsibilities of teachers and other program people, curriculum, assessment guidelines for students performance etc.

Curriculum and Examination in Mobile School: At the beginning of learning students are given some simple toys and puzzles. Children are told stories. At the second stage a pocket board, alphabet cards, cards with word and picture are given for learning of the beginners. In addition, the pocket board is also used to learn the numbers. At the third stage books of class one are provided which are used to teach in the government primary schools. Curriculum and Text Books of Government primary schools of class I, Class II, Class III and Class IV is used for the students of mobile schools. Class tests and three examinations are organized in the schools to assess the achievement of the students using the question of examination of the nearby government primary school.

Inclusion of mobile school students in the Government Primary Schools: Now 47 students who has completed class II-III from the mobile schools are currently studying in the government primary schools of Haldia and Kumarbhog unions of Louhajanj and some other students have enrolled in the Lillah Boarding (free religious institutions for quoting Al-Quaran). From Aminbazaar mobile school 16 students have already passed class 3 and they voluntary got admitted in government primary school and madrasa for better education at Louhajanj where some of their relatives stay all round the year and these students now are able to live in a place without their parents.

Ways forward to Implement and Develop the Mobile School Model: Now the prime responsibility of Grambangla Unnayan Committee is to work for advocacy of the designed mobile school model so that government, other national and international NGOs and Bede community themselves can replicate the mobile school model for eradicating illiteracy.

Participatory Monitoring and Supervision: After reaching a new spot the teachers of the mobile schools make phone calls from the local mobile phone call shop to the program officer so that the mobile school supervisor can make a plan to visit that school. This teacher has been instructed to make one phone call in each week. After receiving the phone call the External Animators (Principal Researcher/Field Research Officer/Supervisor) know the geographical location i.e. temporary address of that group and they visit the group. During this visit the External Animators (Principal Researcher/Field Research Officer/Supervisor) participate in the mobile school activities i.e. they teach the students, they teach the teachers, help the teachers to understand the lessons to be taught in future. One External Animator (Supervisors) stay 5 days in a month with each of the 11 groups. There are three External Animators (Mobile School Supervisors) and they stay 15-20 days with the Bede community. Mobile School Supervisors sleep in the Bede boats at night and they live with the community like a member of that community.

Management of the Mobile Schools: The action research team facilitated to develop work plan by the teachers for implementing the activities of school in a participatory manner. In each of the nomadic Bede groups there are school management committee where mobile schools have been established. This committee sits to discuss different issues including education once in a week. Both adult and adolescent male and female members of the concerned nomadic groups are the members of school management committees. The nomadic groups organize community meetings ensuring participation of the elder males and females, adolescent boys and girls to

discuss about the implementation of the mobile school activities. In such community meeting 20-50 participants usually be present. However, a seven member executive committee is formed to take initiative for community meetings and address the needs of the mobile schools.

9. Linkages Established between the Bede Community and different Stakeholders through this Participatory Action Research (PAR)

This research project has created an endless attraction among the Bedes to think about their own development. Moreover, this research project has been able to attract the attention of many development partners i.e. Save The Children, USA) imparted Training of Trainers (TOT) on “Pre-school and ECCD Material Development” to mobile school teachers and other project staff while another i.e. Intermediate Technology Development Group-ITDG (now Practical Action) provided a week long training on Block- Batik and Tie-Dye training on fabric by their certified trainer. ActionAid, Bangladesh and Bangladesh Freedom Foundation has already started to support the mobile school program. A local NGO, Centre for Mass Education in Science (CMES), with an assignment of UNESCO, has visited the mobile school to assess the potential of mainstreaming the children into the primary education system. A women's group from India, Women's Initiative for Peace in South Asia (WIPSA) took special interest to visit the research project site in Savar near Dhaka during their visit to Bangladesh on a separate mission. Considering the viability of program school program most recently Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), a network of more than 700 NGOs working in the field of education provided training to GUC staff on Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD), Training of Trainers on Literacy, Role of Literacy in Reducing Poverty etc. Recently Early Childhood Development (ECD) Network has given GUC the membership of that network. Beyond everything the innovative intervention design developed through the Participatory Action Research (PAR) project has achieved its accreditation in the national arena. This research project has established linkage between the Bede community and Media on their development issues. Many reports on the development issues especially on mobile school of Bedes have already been published in “The Prothom Alo”, “The Daily Star”, “The Daily Ittefaq”, “The Daily Sangbad”, “The Daily New Nation”, “The New Age”, “The Ajker Kagoj”, “The Daily Independent” etc. Recently British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) broadcasted a program on mobile school in their Bangla program. There is clear evidence that the research has opened the way to wider linkages with development partners who are likely to support many of the community initiatives.

In the PRSP document government has already acknowledged the special needs of the Bedes. Recently a UNESCO publication described the mobile school as one of the best instance of inclusive education in Bangladesh. During the last week three national newspapers have published news on the problems of being enlisted in the voter lists by the Bedes.

10. Recommendations

- Government and their development partners should acknowledge the special need for education of the nomadic Bede children who are roaming with 10,000 nomadic Bede groups.
- Government should include the issue of primary education in PEDP – II.
- The school teachers of government primary schools do not want to enroll the *Bede* children in January because the teachers know that within two months *Bedes* have to leave for traveling as a nomad for a ten months' journey across Bangladesh and/or India. So teachers always discourage to enroll and to give books to the children of *Bedes*. After leaving the *Bede* children, teachers have to show a large number of drop out. Then education department usually scold the teachers, ask the teachers to write explanation and identifies the school as low performing for this high rate of drop out. For the education of *Bede* children this dilemma should be resolved. Government Primary Education department can plan for a flexible primary education system for this community. To promote inclusive education for the *Bede* children, the government primary schools those are located adjacent to 65 identified locations

where Bedes gather once in a year should initiate Bede friendly education system. Those government primary schools should offer the opportunity to the Bede children to study for only two months in a year when they come to gather in those 65 spots.

- Low cost ECCD program like Kajoli model Shishu Shikkha Bikash Kendre should be promoted with mobile schools.
- Prior to launching an education program for the nomadic Bede community it would be better to launch a 2-3 month's teachers' training program for the Bede teachers. Because it is very difficult to find an educated person in a nomadic group who is capable of teaching.
- The operational manual for implementing the mobile school program should be enriched periodically to improve the quality of education.
- In Bede community elder children work as care giver to their younger ones. S/he works as a baby sitter or care giver for bathing, cooking food and feeding their younger ones, playing with them, preparing the babies for sleeping etc. Because of these work load many Bede students face difficulties in attending mobile schools. These types of Bede students who are care givers should be encourage to come to mobile school with their younger ones even for playing instead of studying.
- Environmental education should be promoted in Bede community with importance because their live and livelihood is very closely influenced by their surrounding environment.
- Bedes use the same river water for drinking, cooking and using in other household purposes where the defecate. Since the situation of environmental sanitation and hygienic practices in *Bede* community is highly injurious to their own health and disastrous to surrounding environment so intervention in safe water, sanitation and environmental health should be implemented in this community.
- Bede women are traditionally good entrepreneurs. But to cope with emerging crises they need leadership and entrepreneurship development training.
- This action research project deals with the *Bedes* who live on boats but yet they do not know what would be the experience of working with the *Bedes* who live on tents since this project had no scope to work with the *Bedes* who live on tents.
- Advocacy campaign should be carried out for replicating this designed development intervention model so that government, other national and international NGOs and *Bede* community themselves can replicate the model.
- Capacity building training those help and promote their hereditary business and help preserve their material culture should be promoted for the Bede women. In addition, training on new technologies should also be provided.
- Women of this community can be imparted paramedic and nursing training. Since traditionally Bedes are a healing service rendering community so it would be convenient for them to develop themselves as community health service provider. Bede community may work as bare foot doctors like the Chinese barefoot doctors and this community can earn through procuring and marketing of herbal medicine and medicinal plants.
- Tota mia of Horipur in Thakurgaon district has successfully proved that good earning is possible through developing snake hatchery. Bedes can earn through establishing snake hatcheries. The technology of Tota Mia should be promoted among Bedes. Commercial banks have prospects to develop Bede entrepreneurs especially in snake hatcheries.
- Since 100 percent of the females are illiterate in this community so before launching a skill training program, knowledge on literacy and numeracy should be given to these females.

- In Bede community the issues of marriage registration and birth registration should be promoted and the tradition of child marriage should be eliminated to promote female education.
- The discussion regarding rights of the Bedes as a citizens should promoted in the Bede community as well as in the political parties to help them to be competent in negotiating with the government agencies to establish their rights.
- Bedes should be counted as a minority group like ethnic minorities in census by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh so that they can establish the rationale for their special needs.
- Bedes are denied to include in the voter list since they do not have any land tax certificate or SSC certificate. All the Bedes should be enlisted as voters in Bangladesh.

11. Conclusions

Although only 11 mobile school could do a little for educating this community but now many of the nomadic groups of Bedes think that even being a nomad getting education is possible. Being enrolled in the mobile school the students as well as their parents has found a new horizon of their life. There are numerous research works on the *Bede* community but no research work or its findings could bring some changes or initiate a change process in this community. But after initiating this participatory action research initiative supported and promoted by Research Initiatives, Bangladesh has certainly initiated a change process in this community. Mobile schools have not only educated many of the students of this community but also has shown a way of creating education opportunities in a pragmatic and innovative way. This initiative has made the whole community confident regarding the feasibility of getting education and livelihood skills for a gypsy like nomadic and marginalized group in Bangladesh. Before this initiative getting education opportunities being a nomadic group was an illusory matter for the Bedes in Bangladesh.

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