

Research Article

## Life Style and Social Exclusion of Snake Charmers in Bangladesh

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### ABSTRACT

This article is constructed on the basis of a study conducted in Sunamgonj District in Bangladesh. With the objective of an in-depth exploration on the marginalisation process of snake charmer community, the study used qualitative design. Purposive sampling technique has been used to select both research participants and study area. The study selected one of the villages of snake charmer and all male and female at the age of 18 years and above living in the selected village were considered as the population of the study. Twenty-five villagers were selected as sample and were interviewed with a standardised interview protocol consisting open-ended questions for covering all aspects of the research objectives. In addition with intensive interviewing, two focus group discussions were conducted with the participants. The study reveals that the socio-economic conditions of snake charmers are not so good comparing with the mainstream people of Bangladesh. On the other hand, this community does not have good relation with the people of mainstream society. They are frequently neglected and humiliated by the majority of population mainly because of their status as marginalised community Bose (2003). This people do not get job as majority people are reluctant to allow them to be engaged in mainstream occupations. Government offices ignore them due to their status as snake charmers. They are living within majority of people with same religious faith as Muslim but they are not accepted warmly by the majority Muslims. Name calling, labelling them as inferior group, use of some terms to humiliate and degrade them, etc, have become the part of their everyday life. They are not properly counted in voter list. Many of them cannot cast their votes, and do not have national identity card. They are facing identity crisis. This people want to be recognised as a distinct group like indigenous people.

**Keywords:** Lifestyle, Social Exclusion, Snake charmer, Bangladesh

### INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is one of the overpopulated countries in the world. Due to having massive poverty and lack of employment opportunity, people have engaged in different self-earning activities including traditional occupations as their livelihood. Snake charmers (*Bede*) are one of them who handle snakes and sets them perform rhythmical movements as their livelihoods same to their predecessors (Lawson, 2003). Snake charmer is a nomadic community and is regarded as 'Water Gypsy' or

'River Gypsy' or 'Nomadic People' regarded as a gypsy-like tribe. In Bangladesh, the snake charmer community is widely known as '*Bede*', which is a marginalised Muslim community. They also bands of vagrants who correspond to the gypsies of Europe. The community gives rational explanation of the term '*Bede*' and defend their Arab origin on the basis of similarity with the Arabic word 'Bedouin'. **Bedey** as community belongs mainly to the ethnic Mong-tong (Mangta) of arakan, who in 1638, accompanied the fugitive king of Arakan, Ballal Raja,

and later settled in Bikrampur area near Dhaka. Many of them were converted to Islam over time. Later, the Bedeys spread out to remote areas of Bengal and Assam (<http://www.munsigonj.com>). *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. Their history of origin is still unknown. However, they are living in Bangladesh from time immemorial with their own culture and tradition, which is distinct from majority of the Muslim community. The exact number of this population in Bangladesh is not identified as the population census never calculated them separately as a distinct community. Though this population is isolated as marginalised community by the majority of the Muslim community, government statistics calculate them with majority Muslims.

According to their own estimate, their number will be 1.5 million and living in different parts of the Bangladesh scattered without personal contact with clan members. Recent statistics suggest that their number will be about 500 thousand and most of them lead a gipsy life. Almost all of snake charming family maintain one or more small boats and lead their life in those boats and move around the country. A small section of this population has settled with their families in different small pockets of the country. The people of this community are experiencing different forms of discriminations and many of their culture and life style are different from majority Muslims. This community has some distinct cultural practices those are even different from all other ethnic groups in Bangladesh. So the cultural distinctiveness is the prime constituent of the nomadic *Bedes'* identity in Bangladesh. According to snake charmer community leaders, more than 90% 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 Non-Government Organization (NGO)s 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 short duration *Bedes* have to leave for travelling as nomads for a long-time journey across Bangladesh.

Nomadic *Bede* community's permanent settlements are inside or closer to the majority Muslim community. However, they lead their life and livelihood following

their traditional customs and norms. But the diversity of cultural realities of the nomadic *Bedes* was never taken into consideration in development strategies in Bangladesh. Though cultural diversity is identified as one of the driving forces of development by the UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity, it is ignored by the government labelling them as Muslims with common cultural background. But the reality is different. This community is deprived from basic rights those are ensured as the citizens of Bangladesh. They have less or no access to most of the majority systems and most of them are illiterate. Thus, this people have no or very poor access to majority occupation and depends upon their traditional livelihood that lead poor income and other deprivations. They are looked down upon by the local community and they have very less or no participation in neighbouring majority Muslim community. Their access to social activities outside their community is almost restricted and denied by majority of Muslims and their human rights are violated sometimes by policy maker, development agencies or sometimes even by the state mechanisms. Many snake charmers live in a wandering existence, visit towns and villages on market days and during festivals. Living with snakes is the synonym to live with danger and the snake charmer community led a dangerous livelihood. They apply their ancestral knowledge and techniques to deal with poisonous snakes. With a few exceptions, however, they typically make every effort to keep themselves from harm's way at the time of playing with snakes. For one, the charmer typically sits out of biting range, and his animal is sluggish and reluctant to attack anyway. More drastic means of protection include removing the creature's fangs or venom glands, or even sewing the snake's mouth shut. The most popular species are those native to the snake charmer's home region, typically various kinds of cobras, though vipers and other types of poisonous snakes are also used.

In Bangladesh, snake charmers are typically members of the *Bede* ethnic group. They tend to live on rivers and use boats as shelter and keep moving around places. Market days and the time of festivals are important for snake charmers as they can make good business on those special days. The traditional concept of a snake charmer revolves around the image of a person sitting cross-legged and playing a flute to charm a deadly snake, normally a cobra or a viper, into rising up and swaying

back and forth. Snake charming may also involve the charmer kissing the top of a snake's head, staging a fight between a snake and another animal (e.g., a mongoose) or placing part of the snake into his mouth. Essentially, any street performance that makes use of a snake is considered to be snake charming.

Snake charming most likely began in northern Africa or India. Snake charmers have been practicing their trade for centuries across much of the same area where they can be found today. Historically, snake charmers have been nomads, traveling from village to village performing for spectators. In the mid-twentieth century, snake charming became something of a novelty in the Western World, and tourists began associating the practice with India and northern Africa. Snake charming has fallen out of favour in recent years and was officially banned in India with the passing of the Indian Wildlife Act in 1972.

Snake charmers go about from place to place displaying their snakes, which they keep as precious treasures. Usually, they have a basket which they sling on their shoulders and in which they keep their pet snakes. The *beenas* a special type of flute is their constant companion on which they play sweet tunes, which madden the serpents. It is their man instrument that attracts the attention of the public as well. Their skill in modulating and controlling breath is wonderful and the drawling music which they produce has a strange and fascinating influence. They keep on playing it for quite sometime and they keep on attracting the people. The earliest evidence for snake charming comes from Ancient Egyptian sources. Charmers there mainly acted as magicians and healers. As literate and high powerful men, part of their studies involved learning the various types of snake, the gods to whom they were sacred, and how to treat those who were bitten by the reptiles. Entertainment was also part of their repertoire, and they knew how to handle the animals and charm them for their patrons.

### **RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

There is scarcity of research on snake charmer community in Bangladesh. Despite being members of majority religious groups, this community faces serious challenges. But their circumstances are unnoticed or poorly noticed by policy maker, planners and development

agencies. It is mainly because of lack of available data on the needs and problems of this marginalised community. About 400 families of snake charmers are living in Sunamgonj district of Bangladesh from many years with series of challenges. They are living in a particular village without having close and easy access to and relationship with the neighbour and mainstream community. Even they have been deprived from basic human needs and rights including education, health and other facilities. Traditionally they practice different social customs and values and thus mainstream people find them as distinct group of population without affinity with their culture and thus, usually like to isolate them. These people are experiencing series of difficulties that needs to be addressed for the balanced development of all sections of population. But scarcity of intensive research on this population, people know little about their needs and problems that work as drawback in attracting the attention of development agencies. Due to having close proximity to the research site from the work place of the researchers, they had opportunity to observe their life informally and grew interest to conduct a systematic investigation on this population. Moreover, the research team is devoted and is experienced in exploring the circumstances of marginalised population of the society. Those were the valid ground to select the research topic.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The main objective of the study was to understand the life style and to unveil the pattern of social exclusion of snake charmer community. However, the specific objectives were:

1. To know the economic activities and financial condition of snake charmers.
2. To understand the social and cultural life of the community.
3. To explore the nature of access and problems of access to the mainstream services.
4. To know the risks, threats and uncertainty that the snake charmers encounter frequently.

### **METHODOLOGY**

With the objectives of an in-depth exploration on the marginalisation process of snake charmer community, the research applied case study method under the

guideline of qualitative design. The goal of the qualitative design is to represent the participants' reality as faithfully as possible from their points of participant's view (Morgan and Kunkel 2001). In order to ensure an in-depth exploration on psychological, social, religious and cultural perceptions on the life and livelihood of snake charmers, the qualitative design helped the researchers to gather information through the use of multiple techniques of data collection that includes in-depth interview, formal and informal conversation as well as observation. Since the findings of a research is heavily dependent on reliable data (Patton 1990), the researcher paid special attention in the field work phase. This semi-participatory design provides an opportunity to identify the potential sources of information that can contribute to the objectives and processes of the research.

A purposive sampling has been used to select respondents for this research. A list of village was made based on the concentration of snake charmers. Then one village was purposively selected considering the highest density of snake charmers so that data for the research can be collected successfully. The selected village was known the research team and they visited earlier due to their research interest. Few villagers were also known to research team. Those connectivity was useful to gather qualitative data from a marginalised community. All male and female at the age of 18 years and above living in the selected villages were regarded as the population of the study and 25 were interviewed as the respondents of the research. There are no rigid rules that dictate the process of data collection in qualitative research. Qualitative research has historically been accommodative to three approaches to data collection: (1) in-depth, open-ended interviews, (2) observation and (3) written document (Patton 1990). The study was made to use of a 'mixture' of all three techniques along with informal and formal individual and group discussions.

A standardised interview protocol was developed and applied to collect data from the participants. The protocol emphasises mainly on open-ended questions covering all aspects of the research objectives. Corresponding questions were developed to explore the detailed information on issues such as nature of exploitation, challenges, threat and personal life of the community. Two Focus Group Discussions were conducted with the

participants. Extensive field notes were collected through observation and informal discussion. The successful collection of qualitative data depends largely on the mutual understanding between the researchers and the participants. The researchers and their assistants spend a fair amount of time at the research sites to develop rapport with the participants so that information can be gathered in a free, friendly and trustworthy manner. The collected data have been organised, analysed and interpreted following generally accepted principles and practices associated with qualitative research. Words and phrases in the responses were examined for possible themes. Anecdotes from participants shall be analysed and presented within the context of the circumstances of each situation. Field notes will be organised into a readable narrative description giving regards to the major themes and categories of the design of the research.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

### Demographic Information

About 400 family live in the studied village named Sonapur. Their religious faith is Islam. Due to not having proper formal education most of the people are found to be engaged in their traditional livelihood, such as catching and playing snake, exorcism, ayurvedic (traditional) treatment, etc. While the rate of population growth is decreased in Bangladesh and average family size is declined, the snake charmer community loves to maintain large family. Many of them have six members in their family. Use of contraceptives is low among them as they are not well informed about the importance of small family. Rather large family is to be considered as source of income and opportunities. Though the snake charmer practices joint family culture but recently single family provision has been emerged significantly. They have been living in this locality since before the Liberation War of 1971. Before that they were roaming here and there by boat. Their relatives and some of their family members lived in Barisal and Munsiganj district of Bangladesh. They get together during Eid and other special occasions. According to older respondents the *Mal Mantha* was originated from Iran long ago. Now apart from Sonapur village of Sunamgonj, another part of their relatives live in Saver area of Dhaka district and Louhojang in Munsiganj district of Bangladesh.

### Occupation

There are two types of snake charmer communities in the locality. One called *Sapurea Mantha* who usually goes for snake charming. The other community is known as *Mal Mantha* who engaged in traditional medicine selling. In *Sapura Mmanda*, both male and female engage in snake charming. Usually they do their business on foot in the nearby villages, but sometimes they go to the district city to sell medicine. Due to having poor income from their traditional livelihood, few members of snake charming community have changed their occupation those are less attractive to the majority community. Due to having less access to all kind of occupation, their new involvement is found to be concentrated in agricultural labour, hunting birds and working in welding factory. This new involvement is not generating good income for them as almost all of those activities are low paid. On the other hand, among them who are engaged in their ancestral occupation is not satisfied with it as those are risky, low paid and become unpopular. One of our participants who was an older community leader mentioned,

*People treated us negatively. The Mainstream people consider us as an inferior group and neglect us because of our traditional occupation. On the other hand, we have very low income for charming snake, which cannot fulfill our everyday needs. The occupation is risky also. Moreover, we travel throughout the country for our mere survival. In some instance, our temporary settlement depends upon the mercy of local people. People come to our shelter and observe our people as if we are zoo animal. We are not interested to continue our traditional occupations. But we are helpless. Majority people do not accept us easily in their world. Beside those realities, due to not having available opportunity and skills to engage in mainstream occupation, we cannot abandon our traditional occupation.*

Low income forces all family members including children to be involved in economic activities. This reality restricts their children from receiving education and ultimately forces them to be involved in traditional

occupation. But due to having present unhealthy circumstances and uncertain future parents are not interested to see their children as snake charmer in future. Respondents say,

*Each members of our family try to provide financial contribution for fulfilling basic needs. Despite this joint effort we cannot properly fulfill our basic needs. When we fall in crisis then we have to borrow money from other people of our own community and also take loan from bank. But getting loan from any bank is not an easy task for us. Their nomadic characteristics discourage commercial banks and NGOs to provide micro-credit for them. Snake charmer community is also reluctant to receive or seek support from anybody outside the community. This people try to solve their problem on their own effort.*

### Education and Religious Practices

Almost half of the respondents were found to be illiterate. Among the literate respondents, majority completed primary level of education. We found only one respondent who completed Secondary School Certificate (SSC) grade. There is only one primary school in Sonapur village, which is governed and financed by the villagers. Many non-government organisations showed their interest to support their school several times. But they are not interested to take their support as they have been trying to get government affiliation. Even they believe that involvement of NGO would not be favourable for their community. One hundred and three students studying in this school and almost ninety students remain present every day in the school. There are only four teachers in the school, which is not sufficient enough for the students. There is no higher secondary school or college in the community. After completing primary education they need to go outside the village to undergo further education such as secondary or higher secondary. There are only three students in this community who passed SSC, two students completed Higher Secondary Certificate and one has completed Bachelor degree. Most of the guardians are aware about education but there have some drawbacks. School space is not sufficient and teachers are not available. Lack of supervision

is another significant problem for the development of the quality of education. Home environment is hostile for children as most of the people including children in the community are engaged in multiple activities like charming snakes and household activities. Thus, most of the children of snake charmer's community are dropout from primary education or stop their study after completion of primary education.

### **Health and Sanitation System**

There is no health-care centre in this village except a pharmacy and a Para-medic doctor. The nearest hospital of this village is Sunamgong sadar. Usually they practice traditional healing system including *Ayurvedic* treatment, exorcism, magic, sacred speech, etc. *Ayurvedic* is one of the most popular occupations in the community. Community people are aware about proper health-care facilities but most of the people believe in *Ayurvedic* treatment. In case of general illness, most of them go to *Ayurvedic* physician and some of them go to community's pharmacy. They also take non-medical treatment such as magic, exorcism, etc. The transportation system to some extent is easy and available. They only go to the sadar hospital in cases of severe illness like complicated pregnancy, accident, severe ailment and any other diseases, which are not curable by their traditional healing system. But when snake bites a person, the community people follow their traditional treatment system like 'Jar-Fuk' without taking modern medical service. They believe that their treatment is similar to medical treatment.

The sanitation system of the community is not satisfactory. Very few people who are financially solvent use hygienic sanitary latrine but most of them use 'katcha' toilet made of bamboo and fenced by cloth or leaves, which is unhygienic and is a dominant source of water-borne diseases. As a result, they suffer from various kinds of diseases, such as typhoid, diarrhea, cholera, dysentery, etc. The Government did not take any initiative for introducing hygienic sanitation system but has taken steps for pure drinking water. Government provided deep-tube well in almost every house of the community. Women and children suffer from malnutrition and different kinds of diseases but they cannot get any kind of special facilities from Governments health interventions such as EPI programme, family health-care service, etc. in the

community. At the time of pregnancy, pregnant women and family members are not aware about the risk of pregnancy. Family does not take care of pregnant women properly. For this reason, pregnant women suffer from malnutrition. As a result, there is a growing incident of maternal and infant mortality rate in the snake charmer's community. At the time of delivery, pregnant women usually avoid hospital and follow traditional delivery system at their home. Traditional birth attendants who are mostly untrained or with no scientific skills and idea take responsibility during delivery. On the other hand, children do not get healthy food due to their poverty.

People of Sonapur village are affected by flood every year. During the flood, they cannot get pure drinking water. Most of their tube wells go under water and have poor or no access to other sources of water outside their villages mainly because of their identity as snake charmers. Government support is not visible in their community during flood. These people have no representation in local self-government. As the government supports are provided by local self-government, snake charmer community's needs remain unnoticed and reasonably do not get government support. They try to manage this situation on their own.

### **Social and Cultural Life**

As a marginalised community, villagers of Sonapur maintain their distinct social and cultural life. This village of snake charmer community is surrounded by mainstream community. But due to not having connectivity or relationship with them, snake charmers found them alone and isolated like an island. Given this reality, this community is well-integrated and always tries to practice their distinct cultural practices in their everyday life. However, sometimes they have to compromise to majority culture. The study indicates that the community has been changing their social and cultural life style influenced by the mainstream community. Surprisingly, this is a special pattern of assimilation in which the snake charmer community is changing few of their own cultural practices and that is mainly practiced within their own territory. Change in their socio-cultural life does not matter to the majority people as snake charmers are not or poorly allowed to participate in majority cultural and social activities. One of our participants viewed,

*We have some progress in our cultural life as our people are trying to receive education and few got opportunity to work outside our community especially who are in abroad. Though our people do not experience any humiliation there in abroad, here in our own land we are discriminated by our Muslim brothers.*

Snake charmer community has distinct social and cultural life that starts from their marriage. A male usually got married at the age of 20 years, while females are married at younger age. Tradition of early marriage is strongly prevalent among them as a part of their culture. Prior to marriage, the girl children are put to work helping their parents to sale various items or become trained in their ancestral medicinal practices. This training is considered as part of their independence. On the other hand, male are trained in snake catching or snake charming so that they can lead their life on their own income after marriage. Before marriage both male and female sacrifice their income to their parents who decide what the outcome of that income will be. After marriage, the young couple is allowed to live separately. Due to the nature of their livelihood, the newlywed couple has to move around places and naturally does not reside in either parent's home. Thus, the snake charmers do not have extensive family systems like most other Bangladeshis, where the daughter goes to reside at the house of the husband's parents.

Since they are Muslim in religion, they follow the Muslim marriage and divorce laws and rituals. There is no specific age of marriage in the community but early marriage is common among them. Though marriage registration is an obligation for Muslims in Bangladesh, the snake charmer community usually tries to ignore this important legal part of Muslim marriage. Usually they arrange marriage in their own community. Even they do not like to arrange marriage between sub-groups among them. No marriage takes place between *Sapure Mantha* and *Mal Mantha*. For example, *Sapure Mantha* may arrange marriage within their community. However, in recent years changes have been taken place as they are making few marriage relationships outside their community. Sometimes, marriage can take place between the boy of *Sapure Mantha* and girl of mainstream community. They never negotiate marriage between their girls

with mainstream community's boys because of some genuine reasons. One respondent opined that,

*They (mainstream community people) insult us verbally. We are afraid that our girls will be tortured in their husband's family if we arrange marriage of our girls with mainstream boys. We sit together and talk with them friendly but they abuse us. Sometimes they use abusing words as if we are untouchable.*

In case of dowry, Bede has multiple practices in their community that varies from group to group. One sub-group does not like to receive any dowry but other may have the positive attitude. In *Mal Mantha*, dowry is given to the bride from groom. This system is practiced from the very beginning. On the other hand, *Sapure Manta* denied it and argued that this role is not their original custom. They received cash money as dowry. But both groups allow exchanging valuable gifts at the time of marriage but there is no hard and fast rule to maintain. Both parties usually do it willingly.

There is no special entertainment arrangement for the community. The majority of the respondents entertain with gossiping. Significantly television with satellite connection is very common here and now they entertain themselves by watching different programmes on television. Besides these, some of respondents spent their leisure time with their family. They participate in different social activities inside their community. They also participate in different social religious functions and festivals outside their community but without access. As they opined that,

*We often invite our mainstream neighbours to our different festivals and sometimes they also invite us. Though we like to participate at their festivals but very few of them come and participate with us. But mentally they clearly maintain distance which often embarrasses us.*

Many of them move from one place to another for earning their livelihood. The snake charmer community participates in different types of social and

religious programmes. Their most popular programme is 'Sommelon'. On this occasion, all of their members who stay outside the community they come back to the community and participate in this festival. Most of the marriage of the community held on that occasion.

### **Survival Struggle**

Snake charmers of Sonapur village have been facing financial crises and social discrimination. Their amount of income has been decreasing as mass people are showing less interest to watch snake dance and their traditional treatment. On the other hand, as they are not warmly accepted to the majority community, they get very little or no support from them. Having those critical realities they have to try to maintain their livelihood with their own efforts. The majority of the respondents earn between 5,000 and 8,000 taka. A significant number of people can earn up to 16,000 taka. This amount of income forces them into financial crisis to mitigate their family expenditure. In crisis, half of the respondent seeks financial help from others and usually they get it from relatives and neighbours.

### **Gender Role in the Community**

Participation in economic activities and participation in decision-making process are totally different in this community. Whereas both male and female are engaged in economic activities but the snake charmer community belongs to patriarchal family system. Husband or other male person is the key decision maker in the family, even at community level, male are the dominant party. Women do not take any decision in inside or outside. However, both male and female work together in different sectors like agriculture, snake charming and so on. In snake charmer's culture, both male and female are responsible to support family economically. But this economic power failed to empower the women of snake charmers community, which might be viewed as a contradiction to modern thoughts on women's empowerment through economic empowerment. Like majority community, male dominate women and almost all of their family decisions are made by male and in social and community activities women has no participation. A true patriarchy is found to be practiced among snake charmers community. Female respondents said that husband can take any kind of decision but we cannot. Women of snake charmer community are not conscious

about their own rights. However, some progresses are made in recent time. Now-a-days girls and boys are going to school that was not seen earlier.

### **Traditional Judiciary in the Community**

The community practice unique judiciary system to rule their personal and social life in which they are always loyal to their ancestral rules and regulations for their internal family and social affairs. In case of any incident or like that, they follow traditional salish rather go to the police or any other legal authority like majority Muslims. Arbitration process is very important to the community. If any one physically assaulted by the other members even they got seriously injured they must depend on the informal community judiciary system. Usually senior members of the community leaded by the Sardar act as a jury board and make decision or to solve their problem. If any one goes to court for justice, community consider it as the violation of their traditional rules and usually the person is looked down upon by the society. However, in case of serious offences like murder they go to court under the arrangement of community.

The snake charmer community has their own power structure. They have one *Sardar* (head of the village). Each member of community obeys their *Sarder*. If any problem arises, they come to the *Sarder* and this man is responsible to negotiate or resolve it. *Sarder* controls the whole community. Most of their disputes are negotiated during Eid festival. One respondent said,

*There is a Sardar and committee for the resolution of dispute in our community. Dispute dissolution may be made by intellectual and elder people of the community. All members are bound to respect the judgment. If someone does not obey the judgment s/he will be isolated from the community. If s/he wants to reunite in the community, then s/he has to arrange a feast or pay financial compensation to the community. If sometimes murder happens in our community that problem may be solved by their own. However, people prefer to go for formal judicial system for such type of incidence. If there is dispute with mainstream community, they follow the rules and regulations of disputed communities.*

The respect towards tradition is still high in the community of snake charmers. Many of our participants viewed,

*Our people are now working outside the country and many families have at least one member staying at Middle East. We are attaching with mainstream life and livelihoods gradually. But we have deep respect upon our tradition. The social rules of our community are strictly followed. If some one commits any unruly behaviour with others, according to our tradition and system, people look down upon her/him and s/he must get punishment as per the rule of our custom. Financial compensation is a common form of punishment for such kind of unruly activities.*

#### **Access to Mainstream Services and system**

Due to not having higher education or relevant skills and training for mainstream occupations, these people have less access in mainstream jobs unlike agriculture. Snake charmers usually do not get job as majority people are reluctant to allow them to be engaged in mainstream occupations. Government offices ignore them due to their status as snake charmers. Even they do not get registration for their primary school. Social acceptance is not cordial. These people are living with majority people, but are not accepted warmly by the majority Muslims. Name calling, label them as inferior group and the use of some terms to humiliate and degrade them by majority Muslims are common. They are not properly counted in voter list. Many of them cannot cast their votes, do not have national identity card. Even during local government election, people outside their community become united and work against their candidate so that they can be elected. They viewed it as social exclusion due to their identity. This people want to be recognised as a distinct group like indigenous people. One of our participants mentioned that,

*'We are not indigenous, not mainstream but we don't have any identity that can specify our status and social life. Few people from majority people distort the livelihood of snake charmers and blame them for any negative activity in the name of magic or traditional*

*treatment based on faith and herbs. But we are not creating harm to anybody, these are our ancestral livelihoods and we practice it peacefully.'*

Though both majority people and snake charmer community are Muslims, an ego mentality of majority Muslims exists. The snake charmers have some positive changes and success, those are denied or ignored or not recognised by majority Muslims. No government supports are visible in their community as they have nobody in local government body who can raise their needs to the appropriate bodies. We found no government run primary schools, no mosques, no good road and no flood protection measures for this community. However, all of these are essential for the survival and the development of this community. Access to government health services are barely seen, family planning workers barely visits snake charmers villages. Showing frustration and anger, an older male in the community viewed that,

*'Our needs are neglected only because we are from snake charmer community. NGOs are working throughout the country but they have no or very poor attention to us saying that we are nomads and we shall not pay installment regularly. As snake charming not a recognised occupation, we do not get occupational support from any where, so we have to deal all of our problems on our own efforts.'*

#### **Occupation, Occupational Risk and Hazards**

Though few people from snake charmer community are engaging in some mainstream occupations, still their main livelihood is related to snake charming. The majority of respondents engaged in this profession for the duration of 11–25 years. A significant number of snake charmers engaged in this profession from their childhood and possibly before 50 years. Almost all started their profession with snake charming from the very beginning of their childhood. According to their norms, all family members including children are expected to be contributory member in the family. The profession of snake charmer is risky and in fact life threatening as they catch poisonous snakes and deals with it traditionally without

any self-protection. Fear and stress are always with them during catching snake. They start working with some traditional faiths and system like showing brave, remembering almighty Allah's name, keeping traditional medicine closer to them at the time of catching snake, etc. These are ancestrally learnt and practiced by them. If snake bite them, they usually use traditional methods like follow own treatment method. If it fails they go to hospital for modern treatment. But in many cases, patients die as they take delayed decision for taking modern treatment of biting incidence.

In addition with life risk, people's disinterest towards their occupation, the snake charmer community is struggling to continue their occupation. Due to having uncertainty in this occupation, snake charmers face difficulties to survive. Majority of them found no future of this occupation. They think this occupation will disappear in near future. A notable portion of our respondents reported that their income has been decreasing as people are showing less interest to their services. Children and other people have been losing their interest to snake playing as this is risky as well as less opportunity to earn sufficient money for survival. One respondent said,

*'Sometimes we think that we should change our occupation and some people have already changed this occupation. Still many of us are engaged in this occupation as they do not have ability or skill to be engaged in other occupation. We do not want that our children engage in this risky livelihood. We want that our children get proper formal education so that they can arrange a decent way of life. We do not want to be scolded and neglected by majority Muslims. Due to our occupational need we have to lead a nomadic life style and that is why people do not trust us, humiliate and neglect us as nomads, some people label as rootless.'*

### **Desire and Future Hope**

Snake charmers noticed that they have no or little access to the mainstream community, hard to get job, people are losing their faith on their traditional treatment, etc., which have been threatening their existence. In this critical situation, they are looking for assistance

and support from the government and non-government organisations and do expect cordial acceptance from the mainstream community. This community has been deprived from the government services, even from the local body. They hope that government will take necessary actions to develop their community. They desire that government should establish schools, medical centre and good communication infrastructure so that they can contact with urban centres easily and are not isolated from majority services and opportunities. This people also desire that their occupation should be recognised as an independent occupation that are entitled to get government support so that they can establish commercial snake firms to get connection with international snake trade. This people think that non-government organisations can do the similar job. Specially, most of them opined that the government and NGOs can provide training facilities on snake charming so that they can continue this occupation in modern way and can contribute in national income. Besides this, NGOs can provide health and sanitary services in their village. They urged that majority of the people should change their perception towards them and there should have a positive attitude so that both of the communities live peacefully with mutual support and cooperation.

### **Recommendations and Concluding Remark**

Snake charming is a traditional occupation and this people uphold a distinct way of life which has enriched our culture. As diversity is an asset to any dominant culture, it is their responsibility to preserve and protect it. Snake charmer community is special in nature as their culture and tradition are emerged and developed on the basis of their occupation. Thus, the existence of their distinct culture is depending upon the existence of their occupation. As the occupation is under threat, there should have some steps to eliminate those threats. On the other hand, few people desire to change their occupation and thus, opportunity should be created so that they can change their life and livelihood as per their expectations. Given those reality few steps may be recommended for their development.

As the community has less opportunity in receiving education and there is no government support in this regard, it is essential to establish government primary

schools for inside this community considering their growing needs of education. It also can help the government in achieving its target on ensuring primary education for all by 2013.

Health facilities and health education are very poor in the community. Health workers barely visit the community. Thus, government should ensure basic health services to them. At the sometime, awareness building activities should be introduced among them so that they show positive attitude in receiving modern medical supports. Snake charming is the part of our tradition, but now it is under threat due to multiple causes. To ensure the sustainability of this occupation, it is essential to provide legal and financial support by the government and non-government organisation so that they can be trained up in modern way. Due to low income, it is essential to create alternative job facilities for them who are interested. It may be done through livelihood skill-based training and micro-credit programme. Awareness building camping should be introduced to reduce negative social attitudes about snake charmers. This can reduce gap between the communities and the snake charmers can get easy access to majority services and opportunities including jobs those are essential for their existence. Now-a-days,

many of them are excluded from the voter list and thus are unable to get national identity. This restricts them to participate in local and national election. So steps should be undertaken to include them in voter list to ensure their civil and political rights as citizen of Bangladesh.

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