

Changing Socio-economic Conditions of the Malvedat Community of Savar Upazila in Bangladesh

MUSHRAT JAHAN[†] & LIPI SARKAR[‡]

*Department of Anthropology, Jagannath University,
Dhaka 1100, Bangladesh*

E-mail: tagor.monalisa@gmail.com

KEYWORDS: Malvedat community. Savar. Bangshi river. Socio-economic conditions. Tradition and modernity. Urbanization impact. Bangladesh.

ABSTRACT: The Malvedat community were once a nomadic tribe, their manner of life has now been drastically changed. This study investigate the changing socio-economic and cultural condition of this community in the Savar locality of Bangladesh. This study is based on both primary and secondary data. A survey through questionnaire, snowball sampling, focus group discussions and case studies were conducted in the study area. The findings suggest that the Malvedat community are losing their earlier culture characteristics because of a new situation that effecting their earlier political, economic and social organizational structure. The Malvedat community has left the boat and is currently living at the shore as their place of stay. This study shows the present life of the Malvedat community and their economic, socio-cultural conditions, and the changes that have occurred due to the rapid urbanization and environmental impact in their area.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh though a small country compared to other countries of the world, has many minor ethnic groups. The Malvedat, a sub-section of the Vedat community, is a small group of marginalized people living in temporary shelters. The Malvedats are nomadic people but they have now settled permanently in different rural areas of Bangladesh. Their lives are being shaped by their ideology by earning money through various activities including selling 'kabiraji' and herbal medicines. Although there are differences in behaviour and professionalism in the context of the larger society around them. Dalton (1872) called these landless people as 'Gypsy' owing to their living in groups on boats.

Because of the market economy, modern medical system, river navigability and developed communication system, the Malvedats have been

forced to leave the boat and have now started living on the shore. The idea of permanent settlement by avoiding nomadism now exists in this community. As a result, by changing the traditional profession of snakecharmer they are moving towards the various other professions (Hunter, 1875). Therefore, changes have also taken place in their political, economic and social organizational structure of the community. In this context, socio-economic, political and ethnohistorical contexts are needed to observe and analyze how the Malvedats are adapting to this changing situation. So the study also tried to understand the changes in their professional activities. Local politics also are playing a significant role in changing the socio-economic condition of the Malvedat community. And in this context, an effort has been made to present an analytical explanation of this reality.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows: a) to analyse the socio-economic and cultural

[†] Assistant Professor

[‡] Graduate researcher

background of the Malvedat community; b) to explore the process of when and how the trend of professional change among the Malvedat community began; c) to understand how the Malvedats adapt to the larger society in the face of changing realities; and d) to know the position of men and women in terms of professional change as an individual in the population.

Research Rationality: Every society and culture is variable and this trend of change touches all the internal and external elements of society. In the same way, the Malvedat community at Savar has continued to change their personal lives, political lives, cultural status, and economic status as an individual through various processes. At present, they have started leaving the traditional issues of their own culture and accepting the issues of other cultures and acquiring modern education as well as crossing the boundaries of their culture through intimacy with other communities or a larger population. This study also seeks to know how and why are the Malvedats abandoning their traditional profession as ‘snakecharmer’ and engaging in other professions, and other issues including a socio-economic and political system.

Traditionally, the word ‘Vedat’ means ‘Zazabor’ or ‘Nomad’ or ‘Nomadic People’. The Vedat is also called ‘Manta’ which means begging or accepting begging as a means of livelihood. The word Vedat is an evolved form of Vadiya-Baidia-Baidya-Veda. According to James Wise (1883), “...the word Vedat came from the Sanskrit ‘hunter’. The Greek word ‘Nomades’ is considered to be a source of the English word ‘Nomadia’ or ‘Nomads’ (often known as Roma/Gypsies or ‘Sinti’ depending on places or regions) that signifies a group of people who are used to moving from places to places, and are least bothered/interested to settle down in a given location permanently” (Mahmood, 2019). Above all, due to professional differences, the Vedat people are divided into different classes”. James Wise (1883; cf. Mahmood, 2019), was the first author to record the names of different classes of Vedat community in Bangladesh. In this case, he discussed about seven classes of Vedat (Rahman, 1990) such as: 1) Ba-Bajia; 2) Bajikor; 3) Malvedat; 4) Mirshikari; 5) Sanpuria; 6) Sandar, and 7) Rashia.

MALVEDAT COMMUNITY

A sub-section of the Vedat community is Malvedat. The traditional occupations of the Malvedats are to catch and sell snakes, sell traditional medicines as *kabiraji*, charms and amulets selling, and to blow horns, trumpet etc. Jahanara Huq Choudhury (1998) in her book *Pearl Women of Dhaka*, talked about the Vedat people who live in the village of Rupsa in Achinpur, Narayanganj District. She has observed that Vedat women are exercising their family authority through a financial contribution by selling pearl necklaces and maintaining their status in the society. She mainly focused on the dynamism of the Vedat community and assimilation into the larger society.

Dalton (1872) called the Vedat people “wondering Gypsies” or “Bedyas.” There are some similarities in some traits between the Vedat people of our study area and the Vedat people that was studied by Dalton. A member of the Vedat community in Savar said that they are all Muslims and that they are all related to Muhammad.

James Wise (1883) briefly described the Eastern Bengal Vedat community in his article named *Races Castes and Traders of Eastern Bengal*, where he briefly described the physical features, religion, language, habitus, character and occupation of the Vedats.

Hunter (1875) described Vedat community as a nomadic class in his book “*A Statistical Account of Bengal*”, where he mentioned that Vedats are boatmen. Even he attributed their occupation mentioning that they used to collect pearl from water. Vedats used to sell various kinds of medicines and spices. The Malvedats of Savar area used to live in boats and were snake catchers in the past. At present they are living permanently in village and have left wandering. Even most of the Vedats people have given up catching snakes or earning as a snake charmer, and are now engaged in various other professions, jobs and businesses.

This study is followed by some theoretical frameworks which are discussed below.

The culture of the influential people of the society gradually turns into the culture of the common people. Cultural hegemony, is the dominance of the ruling

class of the state, through which the ruling class retains power over subordinates with their consent (Fenton, 2018). This has an impact on the study of society and culture of the Vedat community in Bangladesh. The Malvedat people living in the village of 'Palashdanga' are constantly being influenced by the culture and ideology of a large community as they are a minority group in terms of population and power. Such as they are using the language of the Bengalis instead of their ethnic language as well as they are also celebrating festivals of Bengalis. Even their eating habits, education, culture etc are changing with the time.

The traditional way of life of the Malvedat community is now on the verge of destruction. At present, a large part of the Malvedats are living without residence and have uncertain life. In the pursuit of a livelihood, they are searching various non-traditional occupations for their survival and in reality their socio-economic conditions are thus moving towards a great change. The effects of globalization and capitalism are largely responsible for this change and are the cause of the existential crisis. Malvedats are transforming into multidimensional professions by changing their traditional professions for the desire of a better life. Economy shows the social status of people. The Malvedats have realized over the time that lives are no longer around their earlier profession. As a result their own beliefs and customs are all becoming gradually extinct. So when they go against their traditional culture and take up another culture or another profession, they have to struggle a lot for their survival. Along with this and with it the changing course of the river, their travel range is getting smaller and so they are suffering from the crisis of existence.

MATERIALS & METHODS

The study was conducted in the village of 'Palashdanga' on the banks of the River Bangshi, which flows on the west side of the Savar Upazila 24 km from Dhaka district. "Palashdanga" has been used as a pseudonym for the village. About 16,000 Malvedats live in this village (Islam, 2019). Most of the people of the Malvedat community are involved in various professions. During the survey we were informed around 20,000 Malvedats dwell in the village of Palashdanga where the investigation was

conducted. Only 50 households were involved in the study. These households comprise 269 individuals, 138 males and 131 females. And among the total population of 269, there are 120 male adults, 115 female adults, and 34 children. Only seven people were over the age of 80 years. This settlement has a very small population. The majority of people are in the lower middle class. In this instance, our field informants were ranging in age from 11 to over 60 years, from whom we collected our data. From a total of fifty respondents, 27 male and 21 female respondents were chosen for this interview. Only two responses were over the age of 60 years. Of these sample group, 49 households permanently reside on land and one family lives on a boat. The Malvedats also revealed that 33.09 per cent of the population is illiterate, 59.48 per cent is literate, and 2.23 per cent is educated in Arabic.

In the case of this research, the primary source or primary information has been given more priority. The research work has also been done through research-related books, articles and direct field investigation and experience to make the research work more informative. To refine the understanding with the researched population, rapport building has been done with them and then the main informant has been selected so that the necessary reliable information is collected.

In order to get information from as many people as possible, we have used what is called 'purposive sampling' or 'snowball sampling', and we have also used participatory observation method. 'Focus Group Discussion' and 'Case Studies' have also been taken for the collection of research data. As a first step, intensive interview method has been used to get a lot of information about the Malvedat Community's socio-economic conditions.

DISCUSSION

The original home of the Malvedat community was not in Bengal. The Malvedat came to Bengal at different times in ancient history and settled there. According to 'Banglapedia', the Malvedat is a nomadic people known as the 'Badia' or 'Baidya' who came to Dhaka with the Arakanese King in 1638 as refugees. The Malvedats later were converted to Islam and they first settled in Munshiganj district and later

spread to remote areas of Bangladesh. In the context of Bangladesh, the Malvedats first settled in Bikrampur but later settled in the four villages of Bakterpur, Kanchanpur, Amarpur and Porabari on the banks of the Bangshi River in Savar Upazila.

One informant Yusuf (70 years), the chief of the Malvedat of the village of Palashdanga said that — *“We are descendants of the Prophet Noah and have come from Arab. We are the descendants of those who survived the Ark built by the Prophet Noah. Even we have been living in this village for over 400 years. Our ancestors first came to Bikrampur and then started living here.”* The Malvedats believe that they all started living in the village of Palashdanga through their ancestors and are still living here. In this regard, Nizam, the younger brother of the Sardar of Palashdanga village said that — *“About three generations before me, the ancestors lived in Assam, India. They used to sell medicine and kabiraji there. Once upon a time in Assam diarrhoea, cholera appeared in the form of epidemics and many people died. Then my ancestors took a boat and came down and settled in a place called Kumorganj in the Dhaka district of Bangladesh. But they could not stay there for a long time. Later they started coming towards Savar.”*

The Malvedats at Savar made their living mainly on the Bangshi River. This river is their main source of income. They used to live on this river in boats while constructing their fleet. In this context, a Malvedat named Nasiruddin (80 years) said that — *“We sell snakes and as snakecharmers we earn our livelihood. It is believed that our ancestors came here from Baghdad, Iraq. At first some people came to this Palashdanga village but later many others came and started living on the banks of this river. We have been here for over 450 years.”*

The Malvedats believe that whatever their chief would say and advice is always right. Sardar’s words are final for them. A Malvedat named YarUddin said that — *“We all have to come to the Sardar at the end of the day and are accountable whenever we go. Because he is everything to us. This is how our ancestors lived in India. As their business was not going well so the chief ordered them to leave the place and go somewhere else. Then most of the Malvedat moved here with the Sardar and he started*

their traditional business here like selling kabiraji medicine.”

Economic Status: When the Malvedat community first settled at Palashdanga, they were engaged in their traditional occupations. Even today some Malvedats are still engaged in traditional occupations. The income earned by this profession did not improve their position economically. So the traditional medicinal practice of the Malvedats or entertainment like showing snakecharming no longer attracted the common people like earlier. As a result, they are leaving the traditional professions and are being employed in multidimensional occupations such as in grocery, tailoring, petty jobs, carpentry, labourer work, small business, or as garment worker etc. With the changing of their earlier profession their economic conditions are also changing.

The new professions in which they are now engaged have brought better economic conditions among the Malvedats. A carpenter Chan Miya (40 years) said that — *“I used to show games as snakecharmer. My family of 5 members was not doing well with the income that I earned. Even I could not afford the safety of life and property and the education, medical expenses of the child. That’s why I quit the snakecharming profession and learned to work as a carpenter and took a loan of Taka 8000 from an NGO to buy machinery. I am currently working as a carpenter and have already repaid BRAC’s loan. So I am happy with my family now.”*

The Malvedat community living in the Palashdanga region is in minority in terms of population and power and is constantly being influenced by the ideology and culture of the larger community. And every element of the culture of the larger society becomes the norm for them. So the Malvedats are also currently influenced by cultural hegemony of the larger community and are thus following up the multidimensional professions of the larger society. Now they think that the traditional profession seems disrespectful. MazedUddin (28 years) said that — *“He studied till the second year of honours and taught in a private primary school. Earlier he was catching snakes and selling snakes to cover the cost of his tuition. But his friends of the larger society didn’t take this well. He took their advice seriously and left catching snakes and took to studies and managed a*

small tuition job to meet his study expenses.” As the tuition salary was not high and so he took up an employment in a private primary school. And now after attaining his qualifications he has become a teacher in the school. Thus MazedUddin became culturally hegemonized by the larger society and left his earlier profession to become a teacher. In this way, the more they mix with the Bengali people and their culture, the more they continue to adopt the culture and profession of the Bengalis for their economic improvement subconsciously.

Another notable example of the change in the professional field of the Malvedats is leaving the village for seeking work. Many of the Malvedats have been seen working far away to earn more money. Malvedats are migrating to other districts or even away from their country mainly for improving their financial situation. As an immigrant Kabul Sheikh (30 years) who is a member of the Malvedat community is currently working in Singapore. He moved to Singapore about 4 years ago to earn money. His domestic situation was very poor before he went abroad. He was not able to meet all the needs of his family. Under this situation, he decided to go abroad and is currently he is in a very good financial condition. Kabul Sheikh among the Malvedats has improved his financial situation by migrating abroad.

Some among the the Malvedats are still engaged in traditional occupations. However, the males among them have abandoned the traditional occupations to escape the curse of poverty and accept multidimensional occupations. The Table 1 shows the percentage of the Malvedat people involved in some of the activities based on the data obtained from field at Palashdanga.

TABLE 1

The present occupations of the Malvedat families

Professional Occupations	Number	Percentage
Snakecharmer: Selling amulets, trumpeting, catching snakes	43	37.39
Grocery store, tea stall, bird sellers (parrots shop)	19	16.52
Small business, motors mechanic, tailoring	25	21.74
Police jobs, work in office	5	4.35
Garments and shoe factory work	17	14.78
Migrant worker, carpentry works	6	5.22
Total	115	100

Source: Fieldwork

Changing Role of Women in New Situation

In Malvedat communit presently the women also earn money along with the men. Earlier women used to come home in the evening after showing snakecharming plays all day long travelling from one place to another. They had to give all their earnings to their chief or to the husband. That means their women were in the role of earning money and men were involved in other domestic works. But nowadays this situation has changed where Malvedat men work more outside for earning money. Both men and women are currently working together to make money and improve their economic conditions. In Malvedat community women are now preferring to put up small business shops in the local market, and are engaging themselves in raising poultry and pigeons, doing sewing work, garments work, tailoring work, making puffed rice business, and some are migrating to other areas for seeking alternative occupation or jobs. Thus extra money for each family in the Malvedat community comes from the earnings of these women. A Malvedat women, Sheuly, said — “My mother and aunts used to travel from village to village playing the horn, pick up toothpicks, sale amulets and charms to support the family. I also used to do the same thing at one time. Now we sell tea, as we find ordinary people no longer want to purchase amulet charms. So I have left my earlier profession. Now the money that comes from our present business gives good financial support to our family. I am much better now than earlier.”

The informants said that at present more than 50% of the women in the Malvedat communit of Palashdanga are involved in earning some money. However, among the working women the number of garments workers are more (see Table 2). Thus it can be seen that Malvedat women are playing a significant role in financing their own families.

TABLE 2

Participation of the Malvedat women in different occupations

Professional Occupations	Number	Percentage
Garments worker	33	44.00
Selling ceramic products	8	10.67
Retaining traditional occupation	11	14.67
Raising poultry	13	17.33
Tea seller	5	6.66
Migrants	2	2.67
Other jobs	3	4.00
Total	75	100.00

Source: Fieldwork

Socio-cultural Organisations and Change

The Malvedat community has an ethnic identity. Different social organizations are institutionalized through the resources and interactions that exist among the socialized people. The characteristics and variability of a society or culture can be observed through these social and cultural institutions (Rahman, 2014). So in any social research, it is essential to discuss the socio-cultural issues of that society. Because of the elements of socio-cultural range, human life flows through marriage, family kinship, education, religious rituals, political rights, language etc.

The social and cultural system of the Malvedat community has changed over time. Thus some cultural features have been lost from their culture and some features have been arisen. Further, some earlier cultural elements have survived by changing its form.

Yusuf Malvedat, the chief of the Malvedat community of Palashdanga said in a very depressing tone, "Many were ashamed to introduce themselves as the Malvedat and for this reason many people of our community do not identify themselves with the Malvedat when they go out for work. Especially those who are currently getting education or who have become very rich person feel. They feel reluctant to introduce themselves as the Malvedat. Adom Ali is one such person who does not introduce himself as a Malvedat because his economic condition is now fairly good." As they think that the Malvedat people belong to a lower class. The Malvedats now mostly identify themselves as Muslims, and are descendants of Muhammad Ashraf and so on.

In society, the family is considered the smallest social institution. Just as the family is an important social structure in the society of every nation, so the family is also an important institution in of the Malvedat community. In the past, single family unit was the predominant form among the Malvedats, but they had a large number of children. Because in the past there was not much awareness about birth control among the Malvedats or the need to be conscious about small family as it is today. At present public and private fieldworkers have been informing the Malvedats about the disadvantages of having more children and the rules and benefits of adopting birth control methods and distributing some free birth

control pills. As a result, some women in Malvedats have adopted the birth control method which have resulted in reducing the number of children in Malvedats families, which is less now than in the past (Rahman, 2014). At present most families have a tendency to maintain single family to keep pace with the current time. Now most of the families have 4-6 members and the information gathered from the research informants that out of 50 families, there were 28 nuclear families, 13 extended families and 9 joint families.

The most important element of the social structure in the foundation of the family is marriage. The types of marriage customs differ in different society and culture. Among the studied people of Malvedats, the marriage took place mainly within their tribes. Cross-cousins and parallel-cousins marriage systems also exist in the Malvedat community.

In the past there was an interesting tradition about the Malvedat community marriage system which we came to know through the field informants. 'The would-be groom is perched on the tree's highest branch. To bring down the would-be groom, the bride has to promise to take care of the mother-in-law and the child. Then the groom comes down only if he promises to support the bridegroom for life. Then they got married according to the rules of Islam. However, at present, this practice before marriage is not followed. In the past, the Malvedat community members could not even imagine marrying outside their community. They thought that the exogamous marriage system was a kind of sin. But nowadays romancing of youths is being found between the Malvedats and the neighbouring Bengali Muslim households. Although the Bengali Muslim parents do not want to accept these kind of marriages, the Malvedats are proud of such union. Based on the information obtained from the informants of Palashdanga it is seen that among the 50 families sampled, 47 cases were of normal marriage within their community and only three members of three families married outside their community. However, their marriage alliance has been also registered and approved by the community.

Bride's wealth is an important aspect of Malvedat marriage. According to this custom, the bridegroom's side donates cash or various goods to the groom's side. Widows and divorced girls can also get remarried

in the Malvedat community. Usually the sons of Malvedat families get married with dowry which is more or less a common practice. However, people in Malvedat community do not appreciate dowry socially.

Since the Malvedats are Muslims, their death rituals and ceremonies are similar to those of the larger Muslim community. There is no separate cemetery for the Malvedats in the village of Palashdanga. They are buried in the grave yards of the larger Muslim community. In this case the informant told us that they have to pay Taka 1000/- to bury their dead bodies there. Only those who are economically influential can bury in the graveyard of the larger society. The poor among the Malvedats are not able to take this advantage.

Their traditional language is 'Thar' or 'Thar'. Only a few elderly people know and can speak in this language. One very elderly Malvedat person had lamented that "today's children do not know the language of their ancestors, as it is no more in use." Among the Malvedats community the most cultural change has been observed in the field of language. In earlier times the Malvedats had their own language system 'Thar' or 'Thar' which was spoken by almost every member of the community at that time. But now they communicate in Bengali to keep up their link with their neighbours. They are now taking their early education in the Bengali language.

The most positive change that has taken place among the Malvedats is in the field of education. Based on the research of 50 families of the Malvedat community it is found that 59.48% are literate and 33.09% are illiterate. Some of the Malvedat people who have learned to read Bengali are working or doing business in the city and are sending their children to school. Most Malvedat community members have now realized that education is the most important tool to survive in competitive, capitalist and modern society. Malvedats are Muslims and they perform all their religious ceremonies as per Muslim traditions. Generally in the Malvedat society men do not want their wives to work outside. They tell them to do the housework and follow the veil tradition.

Every society and community has a system of leadership and justice. Similarly, there are some rules and regulations within the Malvedat community. Their

judiciary and leadership are different from the larger society around them. The practice of Sardar is still intact among them. Their Sardars are elected not only hereditarily as before but are also based on the influence, prestige and economic status of the individual. Sardar tries to solve all the problems. But if they cannot find a solution to a problem in difficult situation the Malvedat community takes the help of the police and court. A case is discussed in this regard. Sulekha Begum is a member of the Malvedat community. She was 35 years old. Shulekha has 4 daughters and one son. Both husband and wife are engaged as snakecharmers and give their show in villages and also blow the trumpet. One day, one daughter of Shulekha was forceably taken away by one Malvedat person. She went to the Chief to rescue the girl but the Chief didn't do any justice. So both husband and wife went to the police station for the rescuing their daughter. Police then later rescued the girl from the clutches of that person. Although the position of Sardar and his authority prevails in their society at present but people prefer to take help of the police. Nowadays almost everyone goes to the police and court if the problem is not solved by the Sardar.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the socio-economic conditions of the Malvedat community reveals that although the community is known to be a nomadic people, based on the information obtained from the research, it can be said that at present there is a great lack of nomadic concept among the Malvedats. The Malvedat community had no land and thus they are deprived, despised and neglected by the larger society. So they are trying to adapt to the wider society through employment in new professions. A change has come in the economic field as well as in their cultural field. The immense change in their professional and through it, in their economic conditions, is affecting every aspect of the life of the Malvedat community. Their quality of life has improved with their change of professions. Traditional occupations have almost become non-existent in the younger generations. This inclination to change their earlier professional field, some other underlying factors are working, like urbanization, industrialization and cultural hegemony etc.

REFERENCES CITED

- Choudhury, Jahanara Huq 1998. *Pearl Women of Dhaka*. Research Compilation and Folklore Division, Bangla Academy: Dhaka.
- Dalton, E. T. 1872. *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*. Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing: Calcutta.
- Fenton, J . 2018. Putting old heads on young shoulders: Helping social work students uncover the neoliberal hegemony. *Social Work Education*, 37(3): 1-14.
- Hunter, W. W. 1875. *A Statistical Account of Bengal. Volume V*, p. 25. Trubner & Co: London.
- Islam, Touhidul 2019. *Badle Jaoa Vedat Palli*. Prothom Alo: Dhaka.
- Mahmood, K. S. 2019. *Bede Community: The Victims of Urbanisation*. The Daily Star: Dhaka.
- Rahman, H. 1990. The Shandar-Beday Community of Bangladesh: A Study of a Quasi-Nomadic People. *Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis. University of Dhaka. Dhaka: Bangladesh*.
- Rahman, K. M. 2014. The trend of socio-economic change in Munshiganj's Malveda community: An Anthropological study. *Samaj Nirikkhon Kendra* (Bengali version), No.131, p.63. October- December, 2014.
- Wise, J. 1883. *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*. Harrison and Sons. (cf. Mahmood, 2019).