

Bagdi Community : Social Inequalities, Marginalization and Cultural Evolution

Dr. Milan Roy

Assistant Professor of History, Ananda Mohan College, Kolkata

Abstract: The Bagdis, an anti-Aryan community, are the representative of other untouchable races born after them. The Bagdis adopted many tenets from the ancient Hindu religion and mingled them into their own. Their distinctions regarding the acceptance of their occupations are also noticed as we notice them in case of their various customs of marriage. But today, those primitive and traditional occupations are at stake. In the British period, the Bagdis were not allowed to get into educational institutions due to their base social status. But though, gradually they are getting enlightened by education day by day, the process is very slow and almost in its starting point. That is why they are putting their best efforts to upgrade themselves and gain recognition to the higher society.

Keywords: Bagdis, Community, Religion, Customs, Education.

The habitation of the Bagdi community could be observed in different parts of Bengal. The majority of the Bagdi communities live in West Bengal of Eastern India and in present Bangladesh. The habitats of Bagdi are mostly observed in the middle and Western region of West Bengal, especially, in the districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Medinipur, Burdwan, Nadia, Hooghly, Howrah, Malda, Jalpaiguri, Cochbihar, Murshidabad and in 24 Parganas (presently, North and South 24 Parganas). Similarly, in the different districts of South and south-west of present Bangladesh such as Greater Faridpur, Kusthia, Jessore, Rajshahi, Khulna, Baguda, Pabna, Dacca, Bakherganj, Mymensingh, Chittagong, etc.¹ The major part of the Hindu community in Bakherganj district is from the Bagdi community. As per the census of 1872, the total population of Bagdi in undivided Bengal was 6,68,56,859 and on an average, the population per square mile was 269.²

In 1872, there were 2,05,074 Bagdi in Burdwan, 56,094 in Birbhum, 93,832 in Medinipur and 35,576 in the district of 24 Parganas.³ According to the census report of 2001, the total population in the Bagdi community was 27 lacs and 40 thousand. The distributions of the population of the entire Bagdi community, in percentage, in the districts were as follows. In the district of Burdwan, the percentage was 20.6, 20.8% in Hooghly, and 13.5% in

Midnapore, 8.8% in Birbhum, 8.6% in Howrah, 6.3% in South 24 Parganas, 4.1% in Murshidabad and 3.4% in the district of Nadia. But in the 6 districts of North Bengal, the total population of Bagdi was only 0.3%.⁴ From the Greek Historians of ancient times, we came to know that during the period of 'Maurya' dynasty, the Bagdi community was the majority in the region of 'Rarh' Bengal.⁵

More than 90% of the Dule Bagdi community lives in rural areas.⁶ Dalton considered the Bagdi caste as a tribal class who were engaged in nuptial relations with the low caste Hindus and because of that, the offsprings, out of that wedlock, were a similar much in appearance and structure.⁷ J.N.Bhattacharjee mentioned them as the aboriginal tribe and as recidivist race, who used to earn their living with the professions like fishing, cutting of wood etc.⁸ The Bagdi community is one of the important among the minority groups in West Bengal. In West Bengal, 90% of the Bagdi are from the sub-caste of 'Dule Bagdi'. 'Dule-Bagdi' sub-caste is contemporaneous to 'Bargakshatriy' who are generally known as agricultural class. Risley mentioned that Bagdi is also known as Bagtit, Bag, Dhara, Khan, Majhi, Masalchi, Mudi, Palankhai, Pramanik, Ferka, Puila, Rai and Sardar also.⁹ During the period of Sen Dynasty, the Bagdi community, in the then various 'Smriti' and 'Puranas' were mentioned as untouchable or 'Mlechha'. At that time, the Bagdi were the labour class of the then society. In 'Bramhabaibarta Puran' they were described as born out of the wedlock of a father of Kshatriya origin and mother from a 'Baishya' community.¹⁰ On the 10th chapter of 'Bramha Khanda' of 'Brahmaboirtapuran', it has been mentioned:

*"Rajput, Poundrok, O Aguri Dhibor,
Rojok Koyali, byadh, Sorbasi Kudard
Bagtit, Mlechha, Jola, sharaf sokole,
Borner songkor Bani khyata dhoratole."*¹¹

Prashanta Chandra Mahalanabish in his anthropometric research found the similarity of the Bagdi community with those of the aboriginals of Bengal.¹² Dharmadas Sarkar mentioned in his treatise: "In serogenetic characters they exhibit a very high frequency of gene B (26-32 per cent) over gene A; M gene incidence (57-60 per cent) conforms to the area. In the Rh system a significant feature had emerged between the two populations of the Bagdi, namely Tentulia and Duley, the former shows a presence of r (12 per cent) and absence of Ro chromosome, whereas in the later r is totally absent; but they have 10 percent of Ro Mid-phalangeal hair are found to be absent in 58 to 65 percent individuals. The incidence of colour-blindness is moderate (5-6 percent). In dermatoglyphic characters, Bagdis have a predominant pattern of loops (52 percent) than whorls (45 percent) the value of the pattern intensify index is on the higher side (14 Percent).¹³ They are not vegetarian but do not include beef and pork in their food. They were known as an agricultural race of oldest origin and they demanded respect like that of

'Kshatriya'.¹⁴ Oldham said that the Bagdi are of the same race from which the 'Souriya' Mal of Rajmahal Hill did originate.¹⁵ He said that the Mal were coreligionist but accepted agriculture as their profession and civilization.¹⁶ Risle mentioned the Mal as an agriculturist race and also as a respectable class who took fishing as profession also.¹⁷

There are various opinions on the origins of Bagdi in different parts of Bengal. It has been observed from different fables that there was a tendency among the Bagdi to link their race with various mythological sages and Gods and Goddesses with the intention to increase their social respect. H. H. Risley in his book mentioned about the various myths on the genesis of the Bagdi race.

- a) In one of the legends, it has been said that Parvati (the goddess) in the disguise of a fisherwoman tried to examine the trustworthiness of Shiva, the god. And Shiva was very annoyed with Parvati and cursed Parvati that her son would be known as Bagdi and would earn his living by fishing.¹⁸
- b) In another legend, different opinion has been said which is mainly accepted in Cochin district. It has been said in the legend that Shiva was maintaining his family in the region of Cochin. At that time, Pârvati in the guise of a fisherwoman ruined the harvest of the coast people and Shiva made her infatuated to him and in due course, Pârvati gave birth of a twin of one girl and one son. In the later period, those two offspring got married and a son was born out of their wedlock. The Bagdi community of Birbhum believes that the son was, Hambir, the king of Bishnupur.¹⁹
- c) In the third legend, it has been mentioned that one attendant of Sita whose name was Rama gave birth to a son out of her association with Rama. And Ram assured that the son would earn a living as a palanquin bearer and they would be trustworthy to common people.²⁰
- d) In Orissa, there is another opinion on the origin of the Bagdi community. According to one, one goddess gave birth to three children in an assembly of Gods and Goddesses. She felt very embarrassed and hid the first child in a sack of tamarind peels and the second child in an iron pot and she hid the third child under the cover of a rod of a sage. Later those children were known in accordance with their hiding places such as 'Tetulia Bagdi', 'Lohar Majhi' and 'Dondo chhotro Majhi'.²¹

The Bagdi community is divided into nine segments and these segments are also divided into various sub-segments:²² Those segments are as under:

1. Tentulia(Tetul), the titles of this segment is specially Bag, Santra, Rai, Khan, Puila.

2. Kasaikulia (Kasai River), Majhi, Mashalchi, Palakhei, Ferka.
3. Dulia (Palanquin bearer), Sardar, Dhar or Dhara.
4. Ujha or Ojha (Purohit).
5. Machua or Mecho (Fisherman)
6. Gunimajhi or Gulimaji.
7. Dandamajhi (The religious rod of a sanyasin)
8. Kushmitia or Kushputra (Kusha grass)
9. Mallamitia or Mallamete or Matiyal (Utensils made of earth)²³

The poor Bagdi community had never had the ability to dress like the people of the aristocratic society. The dresses of the Bagdi too like the marginal classes of the society were very much a symbol of their utmost poverty. They used to wear a piece of cloth very tightly to cover their body. In the rural areas, the aged Bagdi persons were used to wear a dhoti like handloom cloth measuring maximum 5 to 7 hands in length and a Gamcha (towel). Some of the aged males of the community used to wear dhoti in short form. Keeping curly hairs was a style statement at that time. Still now, the males of the Bagdi community in 'Rarh' area are used to have curly hair.²⁴ Females of the community usually wear handloom sarees of about 8 to 9 hands in length. During winter, the Bagdi children used to wear winter uniforms according to their financial capability. Usually, they were used to wear 'Dola' a cheap variety of winter garments like Apu did wear in 'Pather Panchali'.²⁵

The Bagdi were expert in the game of wrestling and as a preparation of a battle, they used to take part in different games and physical exercises. They were employed as club man for long in the job of protecting the wealth of the Zamindars, the feudal lords of 'Rarh Bengal'. The Bagdi were very expert in cudgelling. It is heard that a Bagdi club-man could handle 50 to 100 persons at a time, with the help of his wooden stick.²⁶ The form of war dances which are observed in Bengal, are mainly 'Raibeshe', 'Dhali', 'Kathi', 'Natua' and 'Paik' etc. Still today, the competitions of 'Dangguli', 'Ha du du' or 'Kabadi', 'Nun dhopas' (Which is known as 'Hinge' fight in different areas) could still be observed during the afternoon time. The girl children of Bagdi community also play the games of Putul (dolls), 'Buri Basanta'. The Bagdi males apart from cudgelling were also very apt in 'Raibeshe' games in Birbhum and in its adjoining areas. 'Raibesh' means actually the best bamboo. In Raibeshe, the Bagdi males dance with their best weapons made of Bamboos.²⁷ The males of the Bagdi communities were used to fight in the infantry brigade of the 'Malla' king with their rod, stick, ranpa, bows made from the best quality of bamboos.²⁸

People from Bagdi and Bauri communities of Birbhum district were used to exhibit the dance form in marriage ceremonies. In the year of 1931, Gurusaday Dutta, the district Magistrate of Birbhum took the initiative to improve the dance form and it was introduced as extra-curricular activities

in the school syllabus which became very popular.²⁹ After the end of the dance, there are many types of gymnastics like Danripalla, Kumirchola, charak gach, Talgach, Hanuman don, Jomduar etc.³⁰ In this dance form, dhoti is worn in short and tight form and a red piece of cloth is tightened over it and the upper portion of the body is left bare.

It's a matter of regret that the 'Raibeshe' dance form is almost extinct. Some people are still trying to keep this folk dance form still alive. Presently, the game of cricket is quite popular among the Bagdi than their conventional form of games. Along with cricket, the games of Football and Kabadi have also become popular among the Bagdi community.³¹

Rules of the marriage ceremony of the Bagdi community have been greatly influenced by the Brahmin rules of Hindu religion. The child marriage, as well as the elderly marriage among the Bagdi community in the districts of Bankura and Manbhum, are very much in practice.³² The caste system has closer relations with marriage in Bagdi community than that of profession and eating and drinking together.³³ Bagdi cannot marry outside their sub-caste and within the same 'Goatra' too.³⁴ One Bagdi of 'Tetulia' should have to marry within the 'Tetulia' community only. But any community of 'Shalrishi' sect cannot marry a girl of their own 'Goatra'. The Bagdi like the other branches of ancient 'Astral' sect gives much importance in the use of 'Sindur' in their marriage ceremony. Widow marriage or remarriage of divorcee is very normal in their society. The Bagdi and the Bauri do follow the rules in their communities.³⁵

Marriage is no doubt, very much important in social life. Child marriage and adult marriage both are in vogue in the Bagdi community but child marriage among the Bagdi community in the district of Hooghly community was much in number. The numbers of divorce in marriage was less in the western districts than the districts in east. On the eastern side of Bhagirathi River, adult marriage was quite unknown.³⁶ One from the Tentulia sect should marry a 'Tentulia' only. Anyone from 'Salrishi' sect could not marry a girl from the same 'Goatra'. These rules have been imposed for social and financial reasons with the objective to prevent that no one from other sects could be allowed to enjoy their wealth and property. Though the child marriages, as well as the adult marriages, both are permitted among the lower and upper class of Bagdi community, the numbers of child marriage have been reduced considerably now.³⁷

The Bagdi community did not consider widow marriage as an unkept in their society but it was compulsory to give brass utensils as dowry in widow marriage.³⁸ Widow marriage was very much normal in the Bagdi community except among the Tentulia Bagdi. The widow marriage was held in different places in a different way. In most of the places, the widow marriage was known as 'Sanga'. There were not many adult marriages in the districts of Nadia, Jessore, North and South 24 Parganas but polygamy was permitted in

the Bagri society. In the marriages among the Bagdis, there was no necessity of reciting any Brahmin hymns nor there was any requirement of lighting fire which was considered as an auspicious element of Hindu marriages. The bride and the bridegroom sat on a mat and they were covered with a cloth and in that position, the Bride was worn with an iron bangle by the groom. The widow could marry her late husband's brother if she so wished.

There was divorce also among the Bagdi community which was being considered as the influence of upper caste Hindu society.³⁹ The Brahmin society did not give any importance to such custom of marriage in the Hindu society. The respectable persons of the Bagdi community usually gave permission for divorce in such situations when the husband or the wife was engaged in an act of philandering or if the wife was infertile or disobedient. They could remarry according to the system which was known as 'Sanga'.⁴⁰ But in the present days, the Bagdi community is more flexible with their marriage ceremonies. The child marriage in the society has almost come to an end but the marriage for the aged people are still in vogue.

The Bagdi community people burn dead bodies and offer the ashes in the river or water bodies. If anyone dies of pox or cholera, his body is entombed.⁴¹ The Bagdi observes the profanity period for 13 days. After one month of death, the Shradh ceremony is observed under the guidance of a Brahmin. People of the sub-castes of Dule, Mete, and Beim of the Bagdi community observe Shradh ceremony after 12 days of death. The other sub-castes like Tentule and Kush mete observe Shradh ceremony on the 31st day of death. The influences of the upper caste Brahmins are observed in customs and manners of the Bagdi like burning of dead bodies and in other rituals. The 'Mete' sub-caste of the Bagdi community does not obey the ritual procedures which are being observed by the Brahmins.⁴²

The professions of the Bagdi community people are multipurpose. Fishing is their main profession. And side by side, they are also engaged in various agricultural professions. They also catch crabs, shell-fish, fritter also. District-wise, the professions of the Bagdi are different. The Bagdi are quite loyal to their hereditary profession in comparison to the so-called upper caste people, but still not all of them do follow their traditional profession.⁴³ According to the census of 1901, it is observed that 70.13% of persons of Bagdi community people do follow the professions of their ancestors.

Fishing is their principal traditional profession. (Possibly, fishing is the most ancient profession of this planet). Therefore, they had to depend mostly on water bodies and cultivable land.⁴⁴ Apart from fish, they also catch oysters, crabs, snails etc.⁴⁵ Though materials for catching fish are different area-wise, the conventional components like 'Choughara', 'Chap', 'Jolui', 'Polui' or 'Ghuni' are still in use. Fishermen Bagdi is quite large in number in the districts of Bankura, Birbhum and Murshidabad. They earn their livelihood only by fishing.⁴⁶

Most of the members of the Bagdi community are landless labourers. In some areas, there are some sharecroppers, owners of agricultural land among the Bagdi. Some well-to-do people from the Bagdi community could be observed among the Bagdi community in the districts of Burdwan and Nadia. Those people cultivate agricultural land, taking on lease or as sharecroppers of the crops so grown from the land. Some of them have also been able to purchase some agricultural land. But they are very small in numbers. A good number of boys from the Bagdi community also work as shepherds in rich agricultural families for food and money. Sometimes, the minor boys and girls also accompany their parents in their work.⁴⁷ Presently, there are fewer water bodies and they are being compelled to get engaged in various unorganized sectors for their living.

The members of the Bagdi community apart from their traditional professions are also engaged in various other professions. The Bagdi people who are engaged as boatman are known as 'Laura'. The Bagdi from the; Tentulia' and 'Kasaikulia' are engaged as a mason and in the making of lime, an ingredient for betel leaf.⁴⁸ The 'Dulia' from the 'Bagdi' community also act as Palanquin bearer with much expertise.⁴⁹

After the partition of 1947, the lives of the Bagdi community have changed a lot. The most amazing changes have been observed on both sides of the dividing Bengal. The Bagdi including those from the marginal classes in the partition line of the districts including those of 24 Parganas in Sundarban area were severely affected due to the partition of Bengal. They were toiling hard only in the hope of a bowl of rice for mere survival.⁵⁰ Members of the Bagdi community are living a life by fighting an unequal war with the natural calamities and against the exploitation of the money lenders.

They used to get the means of their livelihood from fisheries but their unplanned fishing and acute poverty is quite responsible for the destruction of that resources and creating an acute problem from them. They are quite unable to have the fruits by keeping their trees alive. The professions of the Bagdi communities in the Sundarban area are quite associated with the soil, water and the Sundarban forest area. The balance of the lives of those wretchedly poor people who are used to live on the bank of river is often get disturbed due to the erosion of the banks of rivers, flood etc.⁵¹ In those critical situations, the Bagdi people, in order to survive, have been compelled to leave traditional professions like cutting of woods, fishing etc instead resort to the professions like pulling of vans and getting engaged in the job as labourers in Brickfields and in poultry farms. Their lives are not stopped despite the lack of security in their lives and facing the fearsome nature very often. Their struggling life proceeds by conquering all awful impediments of their lives.⁵² Although various clans of tribal have been able to keep their traditional culture alive still they have got the fruits of various social and financial changes, in their lives.

There have been wide changes in the pattern of their houses, and in their professions like, fishing, agriculture etc. They are now wearing different types of dresses instead of their traditional dresses. Even their food habits have also been changed. Their mud houses with thatched roofs have now been changed to roofs with tiles and tin. Once they used to live by eating the vegetables and potatoes gathered from the jungle. Now their food habits have also changed. The Bagdi boys are now wearing modern dresses like jeans, T-shirts etc; similarly, the Bagdi girls are also wearing Salwar, Kamij and Synthetic sarees instead of the traditional coarse type of cotton sarees. They have deviated far away from their traditional socio-economic and political stance. The reason behind all those changes is the slackness in their social systems. The unscrupulous people from outside their society try to utilize their labour with paltry sums and some take more than usual money from them as the price for articles given to them. Those people also demand more money from the tribal borrower in repayment.

There have changes in the socio-economic sectors of the Bagdi community. But despite all those, changes in their interpersonal relationships, their social unity could not be affected anyway. After the independence, many efforts were taken to bring back the backward classes to the mainstream of the nation and as a result, the Bagdi communities too have got much improvement in their lifestyle. It is noticed that the sub-castes of the Bagdi community too have got interests in education and in getting governmental jobs. The changes in their lifestyles have encouraged others to follow them. It's a matter of concern that the scope of education and getting service has been limited to some people only. But it is also being increased. Many persons from the community worked not only as teachers of schools but also were capable enough to work as professors in colleges. But the most regrettable matter is that those educated persons from the Bagdi community did virtually nothing for the development of their own community. In accordance with the 'Downward Filtration Policy', those highly educated Bagdi people could be instrumental in educating their community. But that did not happen; instead, those educated Bagdi people, changed their domicile and shifted to the cities and downtowns.

They have adopted the signs of 'Elite' class in their lifestyles. Even, some of them have changed their titles too and have accepted the titles of the upper-class people. After retirement from service, those people never went back to their ancestral villages and felt embarrassed to identify themselves with the Bagdi people. The reason behind this mind concept is that of a psychological complexity which works in them and induce them to feel themselves as improved social person and they cannot bridge the differences with their standing to those of still uneducated in their own community. Even they keep away their children from their traditional manners and customs. Their desire to assimilate with the urban society and culture and have distanced themselves from their own sub-standard society and in the process, they get

detached in all respects with their ancestral society. But despite all their efforts, the educated classes of the Bagdi society are still the subjects of exploitation and the conservativeness of the upper-caste people who never miss any opportunity to ignore and insult them in every step.

Though a major portion of the Bagdi community was submerged in poverty, illiteracy and in various other ills for long but with the passages of time, changes are looming forth over their community and they are gradually coming to light from utter darkness. We all believe that social values play an important role to keep the unity and harmony of a community, intact. The people of the Bagdi community have taken various steps to improve themselves by improving their culture and customs. In this era of globalization, we are on the stride to make a wider human society but instead of that, the importance and relevance of keeping alive the social conditions and culture of the smaller races are still very important.

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