

Seminomadic monkey performers in Bangladesh: movement, health care and socio-economic status

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Abstract

In Bangladesh monkey performers have a centuries-old tradition to train and use monkeys to perform in road-side gatherings or street shows which allow them to earn their livelihoods and entertain people. A pre-designed questionnaire survey was conducted among 228 monkey performer families at the largest monkey performer's village at Kashipur of Jhenaidah district between August 2012 and June 2014. Family members of the monkey performers varied from 3 to 12 individuals with the average 6.04. Most of the males and females in this community were married by the ages of 20 and 17 years respectively. Due to their early marriage, they experienced a very high rate of child mortality, especially among those couples who intermarried (78%) within their community. A total of 101 child deaths were recorded among 228 households, of which 83.2% was female and 16.8% was male. A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.88$) was detected between intermarry and marriage with cousins. Among this community, most of the families (47.1%) had 3 to 5 children. Monkey performance is the main occupation of males (64.5%) while selling of traditional medicine is the main occupation of females (56.5%) in this community. Their daily income ranged from Tk. 200-500 with the average income was Tk. 300 per day. Most of the performers (41.2%) were found to change their performing group for better income opportunity. They had a little access to health care and vaccination. Only 42.1% members got childhood vaccine. In this community most of the people (32.8%) had the common gastrointestinal diseases but they also had some infectious diseases like tuberculosis (4.2%), Malaria (13.9%) and Leprosy (1.2%). Their intimate contact with monkeys can increase the chance of transmitting zoonotic diseases between them.

Introduction

Among the ten species of non-human primates in Bangladesh, five species are macaques and Rhesus Macaque (*Macaca mulatta*) is the only species which is distributed

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both in forests and urban areas⁽¹⁾. Moreover, a significant number of Rhesus Macaques are kept in captivity with the monkey performers^(2,3). Monkey species those have been using to perform different acrobats in street show or other gatherings are known as performing monkey and groups of people who train the monkey and use them to perform in street show or any other gatherings to earn their livelihood, are known as monkey performers⁽²⁾. Performance with non-human primates is encountered throughout the world including Europe^(4,5), Japan^(6,7), Thailand^(8,9) and Indonesia⁽¹⁰⁾.

Bedey, a semi-nomadic ethnic community is regarded as 'Water Gypsy' or 'River Gypsy' or 'Nomadic People' who are depended on animals like monkey and snake for their livelihood and other animals to hunt for food sources⁽¹¹⁾. Generally, monkey performers are one of the casts of this nomadic Bedey people in our country. According to a recent estimate, there are about 500,000 nomadic people in Bangladesh. Around 10,000 nomadic groups roam around Bangladesh round the year, among them about 1000 families are monkey performers⁽¹²⁾.

Monkey performers collect monkeys from the wild in different parts of Bangladesh and train them for acrobats⁽²⁾. They move from one place to another place with monkeys on their back. They show monkey dance or performance especially, the gymnastic performance in villages, towns, streets or any other gatherings for their livelihood and entertaining the people. Since monkey performers travel throughout the country with their monkeys, they may play a vital role in transmitting zoonotic diseases. Previous studies showed that several pathogens are bidirectionally transmitted between human and monkeys^(13,14). Their intimate interaction with monkeys could transmit many zoonotic pathogens including Simian Foamy Virus (SFV) which is highly prevalent and can efficiently transmit through saliva among rhesus macaques (up to 100% of free ranging macaques are infected by age 3)^(15,16). It was also evident that the traveling of monkey performers with their monkeys and their frequent release of monkeys in nearby habitats played a vital role for the transmission of SFV among humans in Bangladesh⁽¹³⁾. However, there is no study on the status of monkey performers and their role in disease transmission. In this context, the present study was designed to investigate the present status of monkey performers, their health care and socio-economic conditions in Bangladesh which is also crucial to know their mode of interaction with performing monkeys.

Materials and Methods

Monkey performers roam different parts of the country throughout the year and they come back to the village once in a year for yearly get together. During that time most of them build a tent on their designated land. In this time a pre-designed questionnaire survey was conducted among 228 monkey performer families at the largest monkey performer's village at Kashipur of Jhenaidah district between August 2012 and June 2014. Some families were also interviewed at their road side semi-sedentary tents after confirming their origin at Kashipur village during the study period. In recent years between 2023 and 2025 when

the monkey performer communities were noticed at road-side tents ($n = 12$), also investigated about the trend of their tradition through oral discussion and found the similar scenario. Data were collected under 6 broad categories including 48 major questions with special emphasis on their health care, movement, monkey population, human-monkey interaction and socio-economic condition of the monkey owners and so on. Field observations were also carried out to crosscheck the information provided by them.

Results and Discussion

Family history

Due to their joint social system, most of the families (43%) had 6 to 8 family members followed by 3 to 5 (32%) and 9 to 12 (10.5%) (Fig. 1). Average number of family members was 6.04 ($n= 228$) individuals per family. They have the tendency to have more wives and more children in each family. Among this community, most of the families (47.1%) had 3 to 5 children and only one-fifth (20.1%) families had 6 to 8 children. However, some families (2%) had 9 to 12 children and in this case, it was found that these people had more than one wife (Fig. 2).

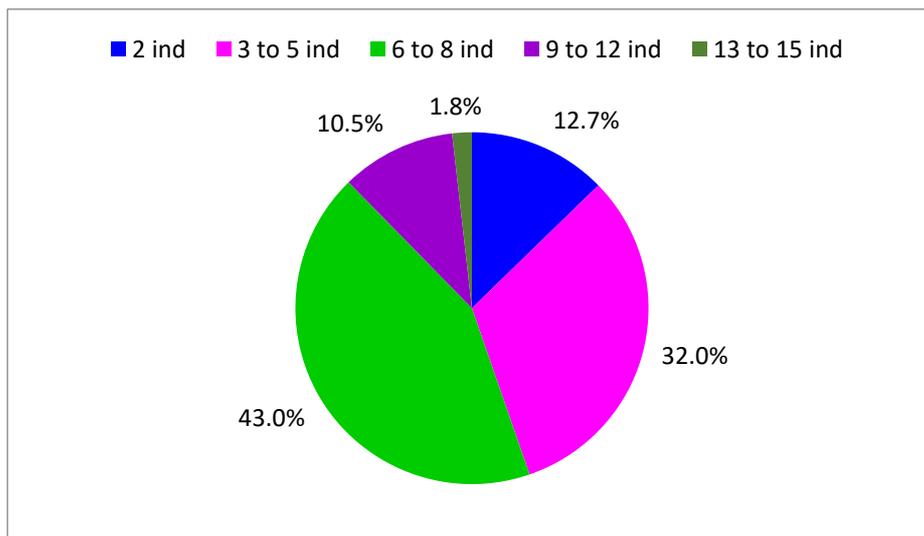


Fig. 1. Percentage of families having different number of members in each family.

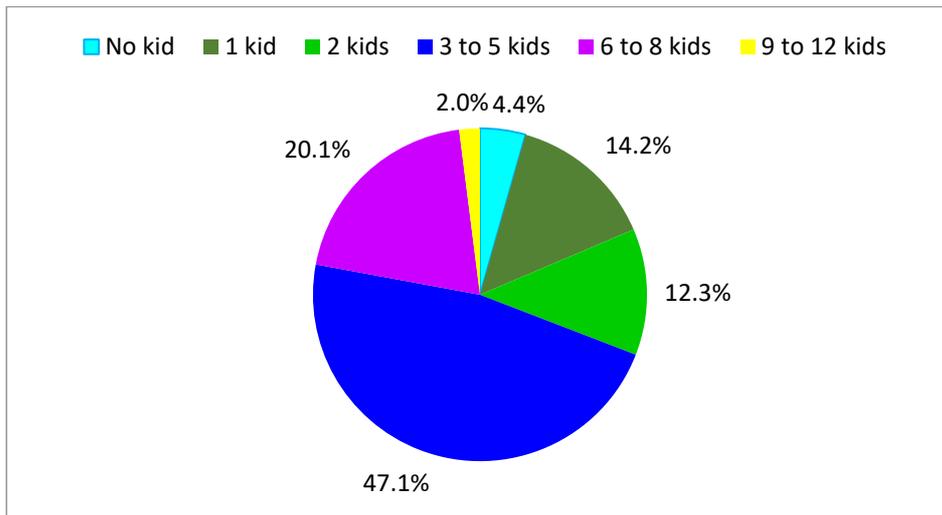


Fig. 2. Percentage of families having different number of children in each family.

In order to increase family members, monkey performers were found to get married at early age. Almost three-quarters of the male's marriage age (74.3%) was below 25 years. Among them, about 40% males of this community married before the provision of marriage age which was 17 to 20 years (Fig. 3 and 4).

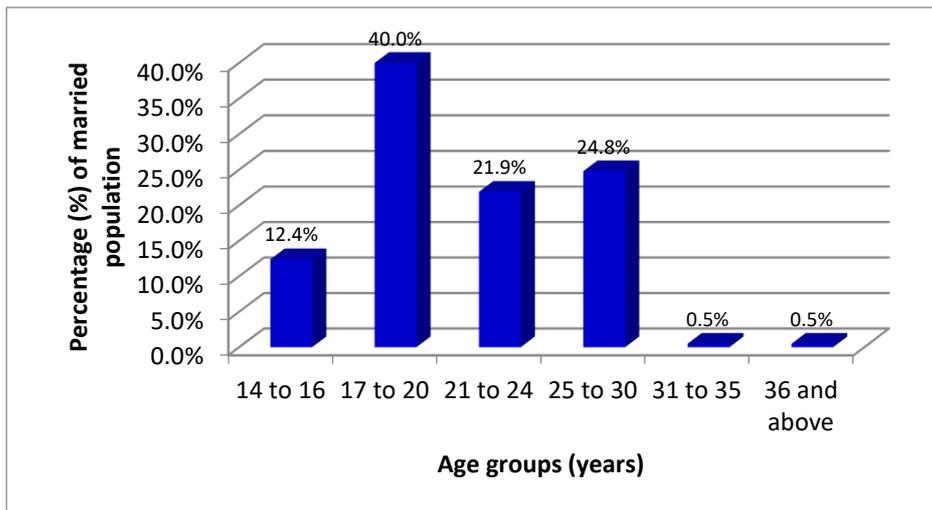


Fig. 3. Age at first marriage of males in monkey performer's community.

Child marriage is very common in this community; most of the females (88.6%) were non-adult at their first marriage age which was below 18 years. Among them, about one-fifth (20.5%) females married at their child age (9 to 11 years old) and more than one-third (32.4%) females married below the age of 15 years.

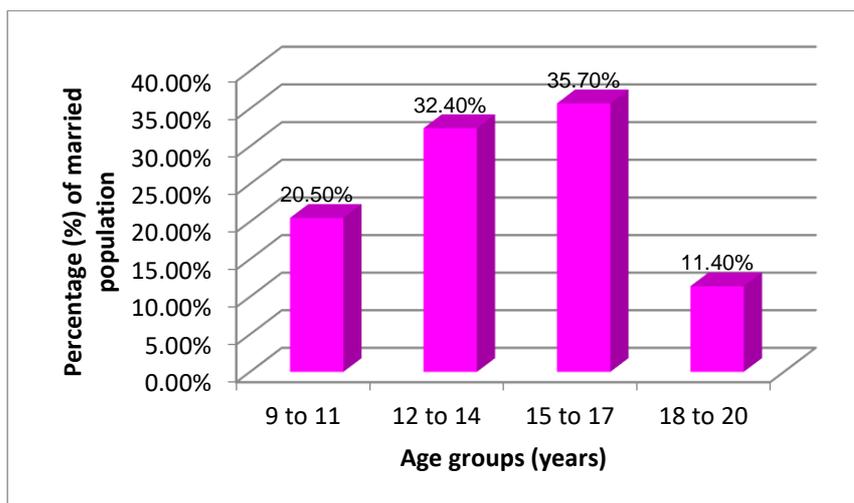


Fig. 4. Age at first marriage of females in monkey performer’s community.

Monkey performers preferred to get married within the community (intermarry). More than half of the families (55.24%) were recorded who intermarried, while 44.76% married outside of their community. A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.88$) was detected between intermarry and marriage with cousins. Marriage age of husband and marriage age of wife were also positively correlated ($r = 0.92$) (Fig. 5).

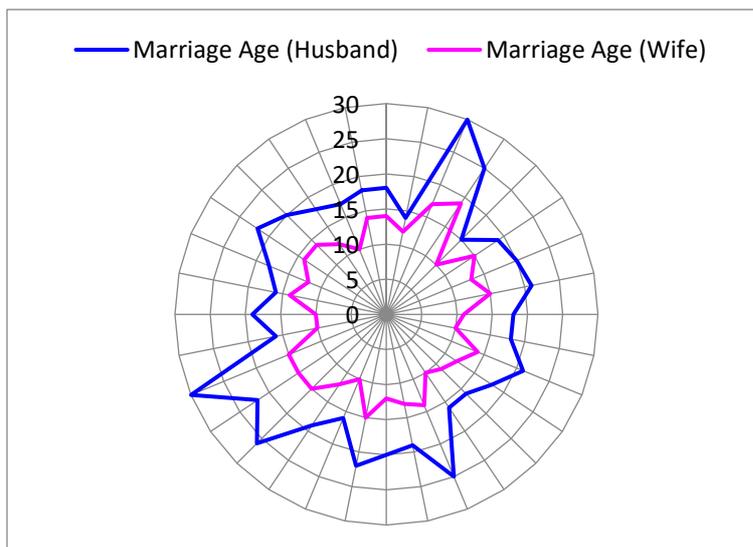


Fig. 5. Relationship between marriage age of husband and wife in monkey performer’s community.

Due to their early marriage, they experienced a very high rate of child mortality, especially among those couples who intermarried (78%) within their community. A total of 101 child death was recorded among the 228 families. Among these casualties, 83.2% was female and 16.8% was male. About 66.3% was the first child and 33.7% was the second child. Most of the child death (83.2%) occurred during the 1st birth.

Movement of monkey performers

Monkey performers roam throughout the country as they do not have any specific movement route. Depending on the availability and suitability, monkey performers were used to hire different types of vehicles to change the camp site such as bus, truck, auto-rickshaw, boats and other vehicles. On the other hand, for their daily movement they also traveled on foot or by local transports. In Bangladesh, their movement is partially influenced by different types of local festival and village trade fairs such as “Boishakhi mela” (fair held on the occasion of 1st day of Bengali New Year), “Rother Mela” (fair held on the occasion of the chariot of Juggernaut in Hindu culture) etc. Moreover, about 13.4% monkey performers mentioned that they travelled India and Myanmar within last 20 years. Among them, 6.7% visited those countries with their monkeys occasionally.

The duration of stay in a camp site varied with the income opportunity and suitability for the next camp site and it also varied with the rural and urban areas (Plate 1). In a village campsite, 94.7% monkey performers were used to stay up to 30 days whereas in urban areas it was 92.9%. In a village camp site, more than one-third (34.2%) monkey performers were found to stay for 10 to 15 days whereas in urban areas around two-fifths (41.2%) performers stayed for those days. About 25.4% and 20.6% monkey performers mentioned that they stayed at the village camp site for 15 to 30 days and one week respectively, which was more than in the town area. About 7% monkey performers stayed more than a month in a town area camp site whereas only 5.3% performers stayed more than a month in a village camp site (Fig. 6).

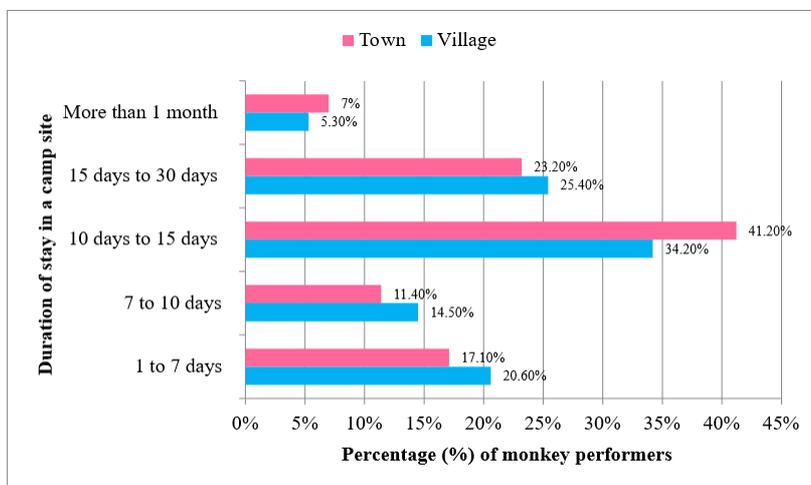


Fig. 6. Duration of stay in a camp site by the monkey performers in town and village areas.



Plate 1. Monkey performer's camp site.

Socio-economic status of monkey performers

Occupation

Most of the monkey performers, especially males of this community inherited their father's occupation of monkey performing (69.7%); then 14.5% inherited snake charming, 7.9% inherited selling of traditional medicine. Most of the females of this community were mostly inherited their mother's occupation of selling traditional medicine (53.1%).

During this study, about 64.5% males of this community were found to engage with monkey performing, followed by traditional medicine selling (26.3%) and snake charming (6.2%). Females of this community were found to mostly (56.5%) engage with selling of traditional medicine, followed by snake charming (34.1%), monkey performing (7.4%) and as a house wife (2%) (Fig. 7). People of this community usually try to continue their parent's occupation as because expertise on that occupation develop over time.

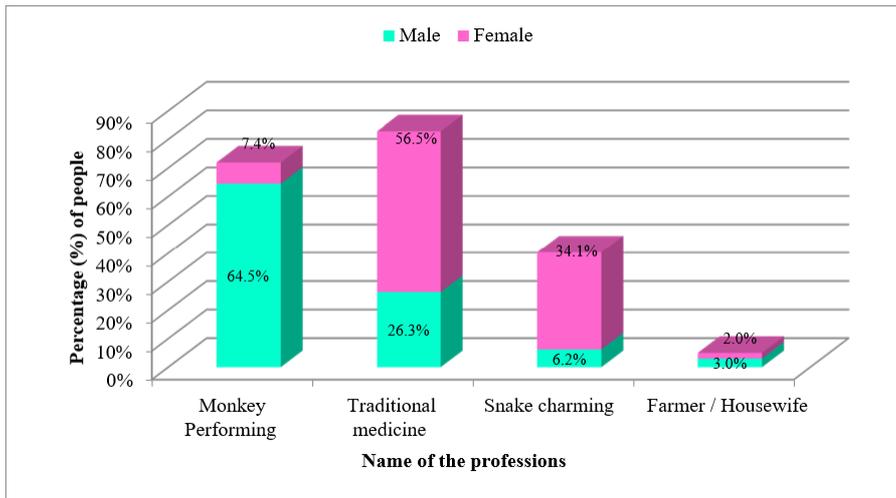


Fig. 7. Occupation of monkey performer's community at Kaliganj, Jhenaidah.

Income

Daily income of monkey performers is variable; ranged from Tk. 200-500 with the average Tk. 300 per day. Most of the performers (36%) had a daily income of Tk. 300. Daily income varies with the performing sites and festival times. Due to their poor economic conditions, 77.6% monkey performers engaged in hunting applying traditional catapults (94.92%) and used the meat of some wild species as their food source. Although all the monkey performers (100%) used to hunt birds, however, about 45.6% monkey performers also preferred to hunt rabbit, mongoose, small cats, civets, monitor lizards, snakes and other available wild animals. Some performers (9.04%) were found to use tame birds like White-breasted Waterhen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*) and Spotted dove (*Streptopelia chinensis*) to hunt individuals of the same species.

Land status

Monkey performers are semi-sedentary nomadic people. They roam throughout the country year-round. However, they do gather at their village once or twice a year. At their village, most of the people (83.8%) have a small piece (around 100 sq ft) of land for housing (Plate 2).



Plate 2. Monkey performer's small piece of permanent land.

They have no permanent settlement, but they make tents on this land during their stay at home. Few people of this community (10.96%) who engaged with agricultural farming had permanent settlement. Only 11% people had cultivated land in addition to housing land.

Social relationship within the groups

They do change performing groups when they may have conflict with their leader's opinion or strained personal relationship within group or between their families and groups or for better income opportunity. About 44.7% monkey performers claimed that they have changed performing groups for better income opportunity and the least performers (15.7%) changed their group due to strained relationship between their family and group.

Access to health care

Only 42.1% people of this community got free childhood vaccine whereas in other parts of the country more than 90% people has been covered under this vaccination program⁽¹⁸⁾. None of the people of this community took any other vaccine rather than free childhood vaccine. Rarely women < 5% in this community received tetanus injection during their pregnancy.

They have some common diseases in their community. Most of the people (32.8%) of this community had suffered from gastrointestinal diseases. Around 15% people had

nutritional deficiency and weakness in addition to malaria (13.9%) and diabetes (12.5%). Some had infectious diseases such as tuberculosis (4.2%), leprosy (1.2%) and HIV (0.8%).

Monkey owner's hands and feet were frequently bitten or scratched by the monkey (Fig. 8). Most of the people (97.8%) did not wash the wound even after being bitten. Only 4.8% patients went to the doctor after severe bites. Around one-third (30.7%) of the monkey performers depended on their own herbal medicine if needed and about 9.6% monkey performers bought unprescribed medicine by themselves. As they are marginalized and low-income people, they have very little access to healthcare.

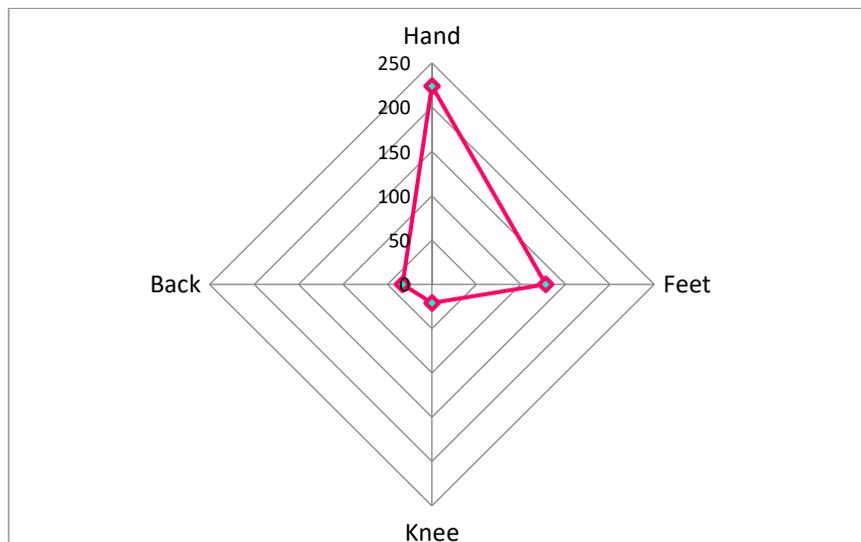


Fig. 8. Bitten and scratched body parts of the people among monkey performer's community.

In Bangladesh around a half-million people are directly involved in the monkey performing profession to earn their livelihood⁽¹²⁾. Generally, monkey performer is one of the casts of the nomadic Bedey people. Those Bedey people spread-out all-over Bengal and eastern India particularly in Assam⁽¹¹⁾. They have been continuing this profession generation after generation but from this study it was revealed that mostly son inherits the tradition of monkey performance from his father. It was also found that males have the tendency to expand earning people in the family. For this reason, a male may marry to several women to increase their family members as well as their income⁽¹²⁾. In a family, regardless of male or female, all the family members go for earning and return home before dusk⁽¹²⁾.

Polygamy and child marriage are not uncommon in this society⁽¹¹⁾. Early marriage is a severe problem in monkey performer's community. Especially, majority of the females in this community get married usually at their childhood age which is below 15 years that was also observed during the study. Marriage and divorce both are decided by the Sardar of the community. He imposes penalty for the violation of norms of the society⁽¹¹⁾. This tradition

is the direct violation of marriage and divorce law of the country. Though their society is apparently patrilineal, but women play a vital role in daily affairs and do all types of hard work⁽¹¹⁾. It was also evident in this study that women work harder for the family but they have no right for decision making and on their paternal property. From this study it was revealed that females are fully unaware about their basic rights due to lack of education.

The current study found that the average number of children per family was much higher but at the same time the child mortality rate was also high because females were underaged and intermarried within their community. Moreover, as the monkey performers are the low-income group people, they do not have the ability to take care of mother as well as their child, therefore, they suffer from malnutrition. These are the reasons for high child mortality in this community.

Nomadic Bedey people generally live-in clusters and roam throughout the year but more frequently during the harvesting season to trade their services in villages. Early monkey performers and other nomadic people were mostly dependent on water transport because Bangladesh's road communication system was not that developed at that time⁽¹¹⁾. But nowadays road transportation system is comparatively better than water transportation system and they use different types of vehicles such as bus, truck, auto-rickshaw, boats and other vehicles depending on the availability and suitability. Sometimes, they hire a truck to change the camp site but for daily movement they move on foot or use local transports.

Usually, the leader of the monkey performer's community distributes the performing area for the next year when they meet up at their village once or twice a year especially during national election to exercise their voting right or during Eid festival. As monkey performing is popular throughout the South Asia, they have a tendency to cross-border movement. In this study it was revealed that some of them visited India and Myanmar and few of them seasonally visited India and Myanmar with their monkeys for earning their livelihood without any passport. Sometimes, they get imprisonment due to the illegal border crossing⁽¹⁷⁾. This cross-border movement may play a vital role for transmitting zoonotic diseases.

Monkey performers lead a very struggling life due to their poor income. Due to the remarkable decrease in demand of their products and services, they are facing difficulties in earning livelihood. For that reason, many monkey performers and other nomadic people are changing their own profession and their original identity is under threat⁽¹¹⁾.

Although the Government of Bangladesh has been continuing free childhood vaccination program, but their children do not get opportunity for vaccination and health services as the monkey performers roam around the county. Moreover, they are not interested on vaccinations because they believe that traditional herbal medicine can cure all kinds of diseases⁽¹¹⁾.

Monkey performers travel on foot from morning to evening. They cannot maintain the time for having breakfast and lunch. Sometimes they starve for the whole day. These may be the reasons for most of the people who suffer from common gastrointestinal diseases that was found in this study. Moreover, they are low-income group of people with large family structure. They do not get enough food, so they try to depend on other food sources including different animals⁽¹¹⁾. Mostly their diet comprises of carbohydrate and little amount of protein which is one of the causes of malnutrition. To meet their protein demand monkey performers had a long tradition to hunt birds, rabbits, mongoose, monitor lizard and other animals which was also observed in this study. But most alarming is that some of the performers possessed infectious diseases like tuberculosis, which can transmit both to the monkey population or their community.

The monkey performer community faces severe water and sanitation crisis during the movement. They do not use any toilet in camp sites and defecate in the open air which ultimately washes out to the nearby water sources. They use same pond or river water for household uses which may be one of the reasons for other gastrointestinal diseases like dysentery and Diarrhoea.

During handling of performing monkey, they were used to get scratch or bite from the monkeys. But in this study, it was found that they do not take care of their wound. Because they cannot afford the health care expenses due to their poor income and they rarely get access to the doctors even in emergency when they move in remote areas. Moreover, they believe that there is no harm from the monkey bite or scratch and they are not worried for this which may play a significant role in bidirectional disease transmission. Generally, they trust in their own traditional herbal medicines. They usually use wild herbs, some of them also use animal parts such as bones of birds and other wild animals, oil of Jackal, bill of Hornbills, trumpets made of the horns of the cows or buffalos, broken glasses and sharp teeth of *Kakila* fish as their treatment instruments⁽¹¹⁾.

The close interaction among the performing monkeys, and with their owners, other members, the audiences, other animals or street dogs may increase the risk of zoonotic disease transmission between human and monkeys⁽²⁾. Monkey performers especially their children have been bitten and scratched almost every day by their monkeys during handling, training, sharing food or water, playing with them, monkey performance or in any other ways. However, relatively little is known concerning how host or viral characteristics influence pathogenic disease transmission. It was evident that prevalence of simian foamy virus (SFV) is more among the people living with rhesus macaques in urban habitats of Bangladesh and in roadside performing macaques⁽¹³⁾. So, further study on the prevalence of SFV among monkey performers is needed for confirmation which will be helpful to make a strong conclusion. Moreover, the Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act 2012 of Bangladesh does not permit to rear any wild animal in captivity which is a punishable offence. So, it is urgent to address how to improve their socio-economic status and ensure the conservation of wild monkeys in nature.

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