

# MANIKGANJ

## Transforming Health Access for the Socially Excluded Bagdi Community.



Ethnic community, Bagdi, deprived of proper education, economic stability, and, most critically, healthcare

An ethnic community, Bagdi, lived for generations at Ghior upazila, Manikganj since they were brought from Bardawan, India to work in British-era indigo plantations.

Despite many social and political ups and downs, they remained in this country but with very low self-esteem. Although they live a distance of only 21 kilometers from Manikganj town, they are marginalized and are on the fringes of society—deprived of proper education, economic stability, and, most critically, healthcare.

Through his initiative, the retired college teacher, Mohammad Monowar Hossain (64), an influential advocate for the health rights forum, went there with medical camps led by the District Health Youth Rights Forum and Bangladesh Health Watch to induce transformative changes ensuring the community's health rights, enhancing awareness and providing basic health services – about which the community had not

heard yet due to paucity of education and its social exclusion.

The Forum's unyielding social welfare commitment empowers the long-lived neglected Bagdi people and enhances regional healthcare.

Monowar Hossain was struck by their sheer deprivation when he first visited Bagdi families, *"Their houses are broken, their bodies are worn out, they haven't enough clothes, they have no income. They eat if they get food; they don't eat if they don't get it, they have no connection with the people of other religions in society,"* he said.

The cultural norms and lack of medical knowledge resulted in their habitual reluctance to seek treatment which led them to stay away from health facilities even during critical moments.

The District Health Rights Forum (DHRF) team and Health Rights Youth Forum (HRYF) organized medical camps where they offered diabetes testing and blood group identification at no cost.

*"We tried to convince them that they are citizens of this country, and they have the right to receive healthcare,"* Monowar added. Their continuous engagement, awareness campaigns, and community meetings made the Bagdi people understand and trust the country's healthcare system.

They started visiting local health clinics when they needed which is a significant shift in their mindset.

*"The people of Bagdi Para now understand that health is a right, and we have to get it. This is a huge change, certainly,"* he said.

The health movement extended beyond the Bagdi community, *"Our 250-bed hospital is cleaner than before,"* Monowar says. *"The mindset of doctors has changed. They want to serve."*

Monowar and his colleagues noticed a different challenge At the Ghior Upazila Hospital. They think that if Bagdi community people go to the hospital at their upazila level, they do not avail proper services.

The challenges include brokers from pharmaceutical companies dominated the premises, and corruption ran deep. However their presence has diminished, and hospital services have improved with persistent advocacy of DHRF.

*"In the past, the Upazilla Hospital complex in Ghior was crowded with brokers and pharmaceutical agents,"* he said. *"But now, their presence has significantly reduced."*

The change is a proven reality as Ayesha Mostafiz (21), a second-year student at Govt. Devendra College, which is a part of the Manikganj Health Rights Youth Forum, surveyed the local hospitals in 2022. *"People would throw garbage near the bins instead of putting it inside,"* she recalls.

A second survey in 2024 revealed that their advocacy brought visible changes and a remarkable shift—hospitals were cleaner, and dustbins were being used. She says, *"This means cleanliness has increased."*

Including the third-gender community, her team also tackled another pressing issue—marginalized groups like Bagdi and other psychologically distant people, due to social stigma who often avoided hospitals.

*"We visit them, conduct health awareness campaigns, and offer free diabetes and blood group tests,"* Ayesha explains. *"Now, more of them are seeking medical care."*

These improvements created a ripple effect, instilling trust in medical services and encouraging more people to seek timely treatment.

Besides the activity of Health Watch and the Forum on the ground in rural areas, their efforts also inspired urban citizens to engage in healthcare activism, an example is Bilkis Raza Parag(55), a housewife and a member of the Health Forum, who became an advocate for domestic workers' health rights.

*"I live in the city, so I cannot go to the marginal people,"* she said. *"But by working with the Forum, I have learned that as patients, we have rights that we deserve."*

She focuses on educating domestic workers and low-income women about healthcare and the services available to them who were unaware that hospitals provided maternal care, vaccination programs, and regular health checkups.



*"By sitting with senior officials at various times, I understand that we are slowly improving,"* Bilkis said.

*"I can talk about my health issues more easily now."*

The forum's most impactful initiative was the introduction of health cards, which provided essential benefits such as consultancy to pregnant mothers, ensuring regular checkups, weight monitoring, and blood pressure measurements.

*"We try for normal deliveries, but if necessary, cesarean sections are performed,"* she explains.

*"A helpline number is also given with the cards, so they can seek help during any emergency,"* said Bilkis Raza.

DHRF's dedicated healthcare activity in Manikganj has proved healthcare awareness can transform even the Bagdi Community which was conservative and

unwilling to take modern medical help through persistent work with local communities.

Monowar noted that their mission had reached significant progress. *"But our work is not done, everyone deserves to maintain their basic rights without any discrimination against their social background,"* he added.

This movement achieved success both in statistical programming outcomes and because people reclaimed their dignity and restored their hope. This story reveals how people recovered their strength and unified their efforts to achieve universal healthcare rights that belong to everyone.