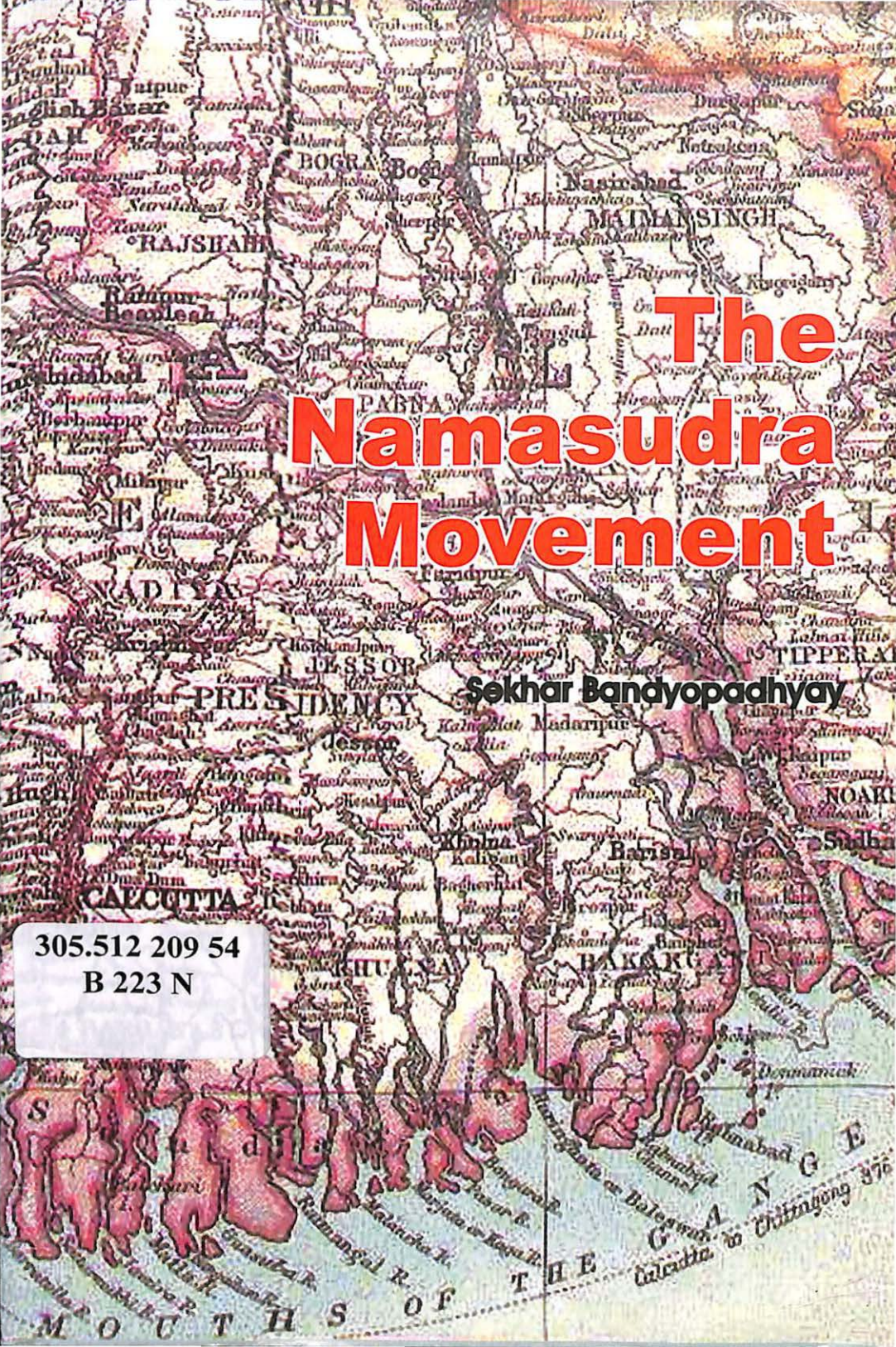
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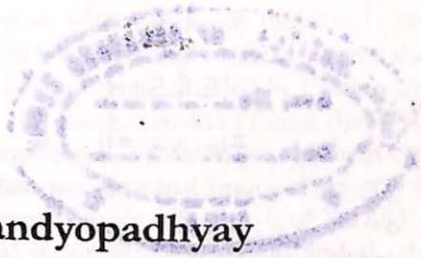

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay

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The Namasudra Movement

Introduction

The Namasudra movement in Bengal is the story of an *antyaja* or untouchable caste, transforming itself from an amphibious peripheral multitude into a settled agricultural community, protesting against the age-old social disabilities and economic exploitation it suffered from, entering the vortex of institutional politics and trying to derive benefit out of it through an essentially loyalist political strategy. The rapid reclamation of the marshy wastes of Eastern Bengal in the nineteenth century provided the hardy Namasudras with an opportunity to better their lot as pioneer cultivators, while previously they lived primarily on boating and fishing, in a region that remained under water for more than six months in a year. As the frontier of cultivation expanded in Eastern Bengal, where the major concentration of the Namasudras could be found, they gradually emerged as a settled agricultural community, and the majority of them came to enjoy the status of the peasantry. However, they had among them only a few landowners, for land in this area remained largely in the hands of the high caste gentry, which provided the capital input for reclamation and therefore, appropriated the major share of the surplus generated by the extension of cultivation.

Nevertheless, their evolution as a peasant community, relatively better off than before, made the Namasudras conscious of their low ritual position and social degradation, as well as the economic exploitation perpetrated on them by the high caste Hindus. The tiny prosperous section, those few landowners and rich peasants among them, felt the pinch all the more sharply. The refusal by their caste superiors to recognise their claims to a higher social status, therefore, bred among them and indeed within the entire community - an attitude of defiance to the social authority of the higher castes, and led to the beginning of the Namasudra 'protest' in 1872. Gradually it developed into a well-organised movement for their social upliftment, as the growth of a Vaishnava sect, *Matua*, exclusively among the Namasudras, brought about greater cohesion and solidarity within the community. The sect, hitherto unknown to the scholars on Vaishnavism, provided for an organisational framework, though informal at the initial stage and brought about a symbiosis between the two strata within the Namasudra community. The relatively better-off leadership, that had given articulate form to the spirit of 'protest' in the minds of their poor and illiterate kinsmen, remained effectively tied with them through caste, religious and kinship linkages. Since many of them, irrespective of their material condition, were the members of the same religious sect, there was greater diffusion of ideas from top to bottom.

As relatively prosperous people became more and more educated at the turn of the century, they began to aspire for greater patronage from the colonial government, which at least theoretically made no distinction of caste. This very aspect of the new regime made it appear, in their perception of history, as a definite improvement over the traditional rule of the discriminating high caste Hindu Rajas. Any political movement against this government was, therefore, interpreted as attempts to end this egalitarian rule and bring back the repressive social control of the higher castes. As the British in the early twentieth century recognised the necessity of protective discrimination in favour of the Muslims, it evoked similar expectations in the minds of the informed leaders of the Namasudra community as well. Their movement, also, began to change its content - it no longer remained a pure social movement, but developed separatist political tendencies as well. But the leadership could hardly afford to move without the community, for the backwardness of the community itself now became a political capital for them. Hence they justified their demand for institutional patronage in the name of social justice and could thus effectively mobilise the majority still boiling with a spirit of 'protest.'

These political tendencies became apparent when the Namasudras refused to participate in the nationalist agitation that followed the first partition of Bengal (1905) and actively opposed it on a number of occasions. The political significance of this non-participation by such an increasingly well-knit caste group becomes clear if we bear in mind that they constituted the largest single Hindu caste group as well as the majority of the Hindu agricultural population in Eastern Bengal. The nationalist leadership was conscious of the situation and did in fact make serious attempts to secure the adherence of this peasant caste. But success eluded them, as in this particular case, class contradiction had converged with caste hatred and together they created a barrier which the high caste gentry leadership of the swadeshi movement could not surmount; more so, because on the one hand, the nationalists could not offer any attractive social or economic programme, while on the other, the barrier was effectively reinforced by the British government which had been systematically giving concessions to this particular community in order to ensure their loyalty and alienate them from the nationalists. The Namasudra movement, as a result, developed two parallel tendencies in the early twentieth century. A 'protest' against the oppressive domination of the high caste landowning indigenous elite ran parallel to an unfaltering allegiance to the patronizing colonial elite. And together, these two tendencies led to the emergence of backward classes politics in Bengal, with the Namasudras as its energetic vanguards as well as the enthusiastic rearguards.

Social and Economic Position of the Namasudras

The Namasudras, earlier known as Chandals, lived mainly in the low-lying

swamp areas of Eastern Bengal. They were most numerous in Bakarganj and Faridpur, as well as in the neighbouring districts of Jessore and Khulna in the west and Dacca and Mymensingh in the north. In 1881, 71 percent of the Namasudras of Bengal proper lived in these six districts. In 1901, this proportion stood at 75.18 per cent. However, to be more precise, the principal concentration of this caste population could be found in the marshy areas of north-west Bakarganj and south Faridpur and the adjoining areas of Naril and Magura subdivisions in Jessore, as well as Sadar and Bagerhat subdivisions in Khulna. These four districts contained more than half of the entire Bengali Namasudra population - 51.64 per cent in 1881 and 54.15 per cent in 1901. And, therefore, this region may be defined, for the convenience of our study, as the principal Namasudra inhabitation zone. Farther west, however, their number diminished rapidly.

Among the Hindus of the region, the Namasudras or Chandals occupied a very low social position and were considered as untouchables. Originally a tribe, this community dwelt in this region before the formation of the Brahmanical social order. Later on, however, they entered the fold of Hinduism, imitated the Hindu social organisation and thus hardened into a caste. But this Hinduisation possibly took place at a comparatively late period, when the caste system had taken its fully developed shape and outsiders were admitted reluctantly and only at the bottom of the structure. This explains, to a large extent, the social degradations the Chandals were subjected to. The Sanskrit scholars despised them as an outcaste and helot people, performing menial duties for the Brahmins and described them as *antebasi* or those who lived on the outskirts of the cities. Manu branded them as the "lowest of mankind," who sprang from the illicit union of a Sudra man and a Brahmin woman, and whose touch defiles the pure. Their social position does not seem to have improved at all even during the Muslim period, as Abul Fazal in the sixteenth century referred to them as "vile wretches."

Coming to the more modern period, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we find that a sizeable section among the Namasudras had embraced either Islam or Christianity to avoid the stigma of untouchability. Those who remained within the fold of the Hindu society were still held to pollute by their touch. The barbers, washermen and sometimes even the scavengers refused their services to them, and for officiating in their religious and social ceremonies, they had their own Brahmins who were disparagingly called *Barna Brahman* or *Chandaler Brahman* and were not received on equal terms by the other members of the priestly caste. In the social feasts, they were required to sit separately and sometimes clear up their own dishes. The Chandals, it thus appears, were not allowed by Hindu society to enjoy any social privilege whatsoever, since the earliest times when they came within its fold.

So far as the internal organisation of the caste is concerned, it was divided into

a number of endogamous sub-castes. There were about twelve sub-castes among the Chandals of Eastern Bengal, six in central and eleven in Western Bengal. Most of these sub-castes were formed on the basis of real or supposed differences of occupation. Each had its place in a graded scale of ranking, which had regional variations. The Halwahs or the cultivators in general claimed precedence over all others. Each sub-caste had its panchayat or administration, which governed the rules of endogamy as well as the norms of social and ritual behaviour of its members. Commensality between the members of different sub-castes was in many areas strictly restricted. The Chandals of Khulna perhaps offered a notable exception to this general rule. For in this district, not merely was the restriction on commensality ignored, but even intermarriage was allowed between different sections. However, when the Namasudra movement started much effort was directed towards the elimination of these sectional differences to achieve a horizontal solidarity among the members of the entire caste. The Namasudra leaders had their first conference in Khulna in 1881, where they stressed the need of unity and caste-consciousness as first steps towards social improvement. But the fact that forty years later, another Namasudra leader had to repeat the same thing in his book indicates the survival of sectional differences within the caste, in spite of the efforts of its leaders. But some kind of working solidarity had also been achieved. The internal differences disappeared, as it seems, when the caste as a whole was in confrontation with the outer world and this solidarity was to a great extent the result of an identity of economic interests shared by the majority of the Namasudra community.

The low social position of the Namasudras, in almost all parts of Bengal, coincided with inferior economic status vis-à-vis the men of the higher castes. Although their traditional occupation was boating and cultivation, they could actually be found in various kinds of professions. They were employed as shopkeepers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, oilmen, fishermen, clubmen etc. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many of them were industrial workers (about 7.20% of the actual workers), some were traders, and a few were in the higher professions. But the majority of them lived on agriculture, as the census statistics of 1911 show, as much as 77.94 per cent of those who had some occupation were associated with it. And in this sense it won't be wrong to call it an agrarian caste. But more appropriately, perhaps, it should be called a peasant caste. For among this Namasudra agricultural population, only 1.15 per cent were in the rent-receiving category, 3.56 per cent were field labourers, wood-cutters etc., and therefore, about 95.71 per cent approximately were tenant-farmers, enjoying the status of either occupancy or non-occupancy raiyat. However, only a few probably had any significant amount of land at their disposal. The rapid reclamation of the swamps and forests of Eastern Bengal transformed the Namasudras into a predominantly cultivating community. But since capital input for reclamation came from the *bhadralok*

gentry, landowning was largely monopolised by them, mainly by the high caste Hindus, Brahmin, Kayastha and Baidya, and the high class Muslims. The majority of the zamindars, independent talukdars and intermediary tenure holders came from their rank. In 1911, for example, in the three Eastern Bengal divisions, Dacca, Rajshahi and Chittagong, for which detailed break-up is available, 80.82 per cent of the 'rent-receivers' belonged to these social groups, while Namasudra representation in this category was just 2.14 per cent. If we look at the Hindu segment alone, approximately 56.58 per cent of the rent-receivers in these three divisions were Hindus; of them 66.58 per cent were Namasudras. Thus the fundamental class dichotomy in Bengal agrarian relations, i.e., between the rent-receivers and the rent-payers, had by and large coincided, in the case of the Namasudras, with the caste hierarchy.

However, towards the end of the nineteenth century a minority of the Namasudras had become prosperous, by taking advantage of reclamation of the forest and marshy tracts in Faridpur and Bakarganj, and in a lesser degree in the neighbouring districts as well. Sometimes the high caste Hindu *bhadralok* landlords could not personally supervise the outlying areas of their estates, leaving the Namasudra and Muslim colonists in a better position to bargain for the security of their tenures, establish their actual control over the land and thus appropriate a greater share of the agricultural surplus generated through extension of cultivation. In the process, some of them achieved fairly comfortable status. A Namasudra big peasant or a cultivating tenure-holder in Bakarganj or Faridpur or a Namasudra *ganthidar* in Jessore was not a rare phenomenon in the late nineteenth or the early twentieth century. With the coming of jute cultivation, these people who had already some surplus, made further profits from the high prices of the new cash crop. The available statistics, however suggest that those who were really prosperous formed only a tiny minority within the entire Namasudra community and were definitely not rich enough to be at par with the high caste Hindu gentry or the Muslim wealthy classes.

Caste Consciousness and Social Protest

The newly prosperous Chandals, in the late nineteenth century, had started feeling a large gap still existing between their recently achieved higher economic status and the continuing low social position. The paradox became more glaring in their eyes as they increasingly came under the influence of different heterodox religious sects. A large number of Chandals had embraced Vaishnavism, which at least theoretically, made no formal distinction between castes. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, the Kartabhajas, a deistical sect that repudiated idolatry and caste, also seem to have had a remarkable influence over the Chandals living in the swamp areas of Faridpur and northeast Bakarganj. In this area, once again, the missionary efforts to spread Christianity were most successful. All these religious ideas which preached equality of man, made the

Chandals, the richer section among them more particularly, conscious of the social disabilities they had been subjected to, by the Hindu society. This consciousness led to the Chandal movement of 1872-73, which later gradually developed into a widespread agitation for the elevation of their social status, in the early twentieth century.

This initial Chandal movement started sometime in late 1872. It had no political significance at that time and was only "an effort made by them to raise themselves in the social scale among the Hindus." The immediate occasion was the *sradh* ceremony of the father of a well-to-do Chandal headman of village Amgram in Bakarganj. Members of the higher castes, at the instigation of the Kayasthas, refused to accept the invitation and dine in the house of a Chandal whose women visited the market places and who were employed as scavengers in jails for removing filth and everything unclean. A meeting of all the Chandal headmen was called immediately and the following resolutions were adopted: women must not in future visit hats and bazars; service of no kind whatever be taken with other castes; food prepared by all other Hindu castes, other than Brahmins, was not to be partaken of.

Their demand of equal treatment in jails between the Chandal criminals and criminals of other castes, was also duly communicated to the government officials visiting the locality. The organisers were alive to the problem of the poorer Chandals who were likely to suffer as a result of the no-work programme. Hence, as a safeguard, it was decided that their relatives should support them, and in case of there being no relative, the village community could do the same. But if, in spite of that, anybody refused to join the movement, he or she was threatened with social ostracism. To ensure participation further, it was publicly announced by beat of drum in the important hats, that it was the government, which had issued orders for the observance of the above resolutions.

As a result, the movement spread rapidly over a wide region comprising the swamp country south of Faridpur and northwest Bakarganj as well as the adjoining areas of Jessore. The epicentre, however, shifted to the district of Faridpur and was located chiefly in Muksudpur and Gopalganj thanas. So complete was the strike, that about four months after its commencement, the Magistrate of Faridpur, in course of his tour in the affected areas, found "the fields....untilled, the houses unthatched, and not a Chandal in the service of Hindu or Mahamadan, or a Chandal woman in any market." The situation was so volatile in Muksudpur and Gopalganj, that extra police had to be mobilised from the divisional headquarter for maintaining peace and order.

But during this time the movement was also showing signs of weakness, as the poorer Chandals found it difficult to sustain it any longer. And as they returned one by one to their old jobs, they had to submit to worse terms than they had before the strike took place. Their main social grievances also

remained unredressed. The higher castes still refused to accept food and water from their hands, and the government preferred not to interfere with an age-old practice of employing the Chandal criminals in conservancy duties in jails, although henceforth, they were only to be persuaded and not to be forced to do so.

After this first unsuccessful attempt to raise their social status by using pressure tactics, the Chandal leaders concentrated more on internal organisation for developing a community consciousness, more firmly rooted in the minds of all classes of their caste members. And this they tried to achieve initially through religion. Harichand Thakur (originally Biswas), coming from a Vaishnavite Chandal rich peasant family of Orakandi in Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur, organised a new sect known as *Matua*. Being a more liberalised form of Vaishnavism, it repudiated casteism, assumed a congregational nature and acknowledged equal rights for all men and women. Initially, Harichand collected his devotees from among the Chandals of the neighbouring villages, who flocked to him to escape social degradation. The higher caste Vaishnavas refused to have any social interaction with the members of this new sect and this resulted in further solidarity within the latter group.

In 1887 Harichand died and his son Guruchand became the new preceptor. He formalised the doctrines of the sect to suit the social needs of an emerging peasant community, and under his stewardship it continuously grew in popularity. The *Matua* sect did not accept casteism or the hegemony of the Brahmins. Water could be had from the hands of any individual who had a "pure character." No other social distinction among men was recognised. Guruchand advised his disciples to stay in family and perform the *Garhasthya dharma* or the responsibilities of a family man. This family life was to be regulated with strict sexual discipline. Chastity of women and proper sexual behaviour by men were emphasized, so that the Namasudras might appear respectable in the eyes of the larger settled agricultural community around them. But what is more important, Guruchand, unlike the preceptors of other monotheistic sects, preached a sort of work ethics, attuned to the needs of the day and requirements of a socially ambitious community. Educate yourself, earn money and be respectable, were his three principal pieces of advice to the disciples. The congregational character of the sect was also retained. The devotees were encouraged to build temples of *Hari* in every locality where everyday they were supposed to assemble to sing devotional songs or *Kirtans* and worship the Lord. No other formal ritual was prescribed for the members of the *Matua* sect, except this regular worshipping of Hari. But at this stage, as it seems, *Hari*, the Lord and *Hari*, the first preceptor, had virtually been identified. On the whole, however, the fatherhood of God and Guru and the brotherhood of men, seem to have been the two cardinal principles of the *Matua* sect.

Gradually this sect attracted more and more devotees from the Namasudra population of Faridpur, Bakarganj, Dacca, Khulna, Jessore and Tippera districts. And the influential Namasudras, therefore, decided to use this religious platform for organising a social protest against their degraded condition. Guruchand with his firm control over the disciples, became the leader of this social movement and Orakandi virtually became its headquarter.

The first and foremost demand articulated through this movement was for the recognition of their more honourable appellation 'Namasudra' in place of the despised 'Chandal'. Attempts at 'Sanskritization' initially took the shape of a claim to Brahmin origin and fabrication of legends that sought to explain their loss of Brahmin status in terms of evil manipulations of the Hindu kings. Later on they began to 'appropriate' social symbols that had previously been the hallmarks of high status of the purer castes. They had already forbidden their women from visiting the markets and refused to accept menial jobs and serve the higher castes. Now child-marriage and widow-celibacy began to grow in popularity. In 1911, 22.2 per cent of the Namasudra girls in the age group of 5-12 years, were either married or widows, the proportion being much higher than that among the traditional higher castes. And the *sradh* or funeral ceremony was held, like the twice-born castes, on the eleventh day of mourning. But parallel to this, signs of westernization were also discernible in their behaviour, because to the enlightened sections of the community the reference category was not the traditional Brahmin, but the high caste urban educated elite, which had been talking at that time of various social reforms. Hence these people also began to speak about the evils of child-marriage and the lamentable plight of the widows. Harichand had realised that illiteracy and ignorance were the roots of all degradation the Namasudra masses suffered from and had, therefore, instructed his son to work for the education of the members of his caste. Guruchand, a farsighted man as he was, could also understand that in order to be socially uplifted the Namasudras must have education, for education begets wealth and without surplus wealth no caste can move up in social scale. And he was realist enough to understand that without the assistance of the ruling authorities they could not hope to achieve this goal.

The first step towards the spread of education was taken in 1880, when a *pathsala* was founded in Orakandi exclusively for the purpose of educating the Namasudra children. Later, towards the beginning of the twentieth century, fresh efforts were made in various other districts, sometimes with the help of Christian missionaries. But progress remained slow. In 1901 only 3.3 per cent of the Namasudras were literate and in 1911, it rose to only 4.9 per cent. Some of these educated Namasudras also made their way into the new world of higher professions, although their number, as it has been already mentioned, was really very insignificant. One of the reasons for such slow progress in the field of education and profession, as the Namasudras believed, was the

competition they had to face from the better-equipped members of the higher castes. Hence they began to think that they deserved special privileges to make good the handicap they suffered from as a result of centuries of social discrimination and economic exploitation. This bred a kind of political separatism among them and brought them closer to the British government. The educated Namasudras in this way began to drift away from the mainstream of nationalist politics and the backwardness of the community was made into a political capital by this upwardly mobile section, trying to carve out a place for themselves in the new competitive world of professions and institutional politics.

However, these well-to-do people, by using their caste and religious linkages and by speaking against the high caste zamindari oppression in the countryside, could also successfully mobilise the Namasudra peasantry, already prepared to shake off the social and economic dominance of the upper castes. To achieve greater solidarity within the caste, a number of meetings to discuss different social questions were held between 1881 and 1930, at different Namasudra villages and Namasudra Hitaishini Samiti was started in Dacca in February, 1902, as a formal organisation to co-ordinate the entire movement. The first of these 'uplift meetings,' as they were popularly known, was held in 1881 in the house of Ishwar Gayen, a Namasudra zamindar of village Duttadanga in the Mollarhat thana of Khulna district. It was presided over by Guruchand himself, and was addressed by sixteen other local leaders from different districts. Self-respect and self-confidence to be promoted through self-help and self-reliance were the main subjects of deliberation and as a follow up measure, it was decided, that such meetings should be held regularly. A series of other meetings followed hereafter. The call to awake to the new day, and to take advantage of the widening horizon of opportunities thrown open to everyone irrespective of caste and status, the need of education both for boys and girls, the evils of early marriage, the plaint and plea of the widows, the new ideal of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men, were the subjects that furnished material for several hours of speechmaking. Attendance sometimes reached up to two thousand. Funeral feasts often provided the occasion for holding such meetings. The funeral ceremonies in prosperous households were followed by funeral feasts, in which sometimes thousands of people were fed. And it became "customary" to hold a great uplift meeting then, before the people could scatter again to their villages. We find reference to one such meeting held sometime in 1910, in the house of a wealthy Namasudra, Ram Charan Poddar of Khulna, after the funeral ceremony of his mother. The meeting began at 3 in the afternoon. Speech followed speech, voicing their newborn hopes and aspirations. Evening fell, flickering oil-lamps were hung around the huge tent and the meeting continued well after 9 o'clock in the night. But along with such informal, and sometimes *impromptu* local gatherings, more formal conferences were held periodically and in their Jessore conference in 1908, it was resolved that the

Namasudra conference would be made permanent and yearly meetings would be orgainsed in different districts for the discussion of their social problems and the spread of education. Village committees were to be formed in every Namasudra village and fifteen such villages would constitute a union. To supervise the work of all such local bodies, there would be a district committee in every district. To raise a permanent Namasudra fund, all such committees at various levels would be authorized to collect subscriptions. A handful of rice had to be set aside before meals in every family and collected weekly by the village committees. Every member of the village committees was supposed to pay a monthly subscription of one anna, of unions two annas and of district committees four annas. Three percent of the expenses incurred in *sradh*, marriage and other ceremonies in every Namasudra family had to be donated to this fund. Apart from this, measures were also advocated for social reform. It was resolved that "any Namasudra marrying his son under 20 or daughter under 10 will be excommunicated." However, to what extent this programme was carried out we do not know.

The organisation of the *Matua* sect, needless to say, provided further opportunities for social mobilisation and helped evolve an articulate community consciousness. Local preachers, like Gopal Sadhu of village Lakshmikhali and Ramani Gosain of Khulna district, Bicharan Gosain of village Taltala in Gopalganj police station of Faridpur, Nakul Sadhu of Gazirhat in Jessore and Bipin Goswami of village Kenabhanga in Barisal, gathered around them hundreds of devotees. And the Baruni mela, their most popular religious festival held on the last day of the Bengali month Chaitra (April) at different places, most important among them being Orakandi and Lakshmikhali, attracted thousands of devotees and provided opportunities for greater interaction among them across localities. A Matuakhali Ashram was opened in the district town of Khulna, where Namasudra students, coming from poor peasant families, could stay and continue their studies. And later in 1932, the initiative of Gopal Sadhu gave the sect a formal organisational framework in the shape of Hari-Guruchand Mission, through which the upper echelon of the community could effectively reach the bottom. Ideas born at the top could thus easily percolate downward. And the preparedness at the bottom to defy the age-old authority of the upper castes provided those at the top with a broader mass base to organise a movement in furtherance of their own ideas.

Never in the past, could the Namasudras fully identify themselves, socially or culturally, with the high caste Hindus. As the Muslims had already developed a social and cultural identity of their own and distinct from that of the Hindus, so did the Namasudras, to some extent, vis-à-vis the high caste Hindus. Exposure to education, even of a minority, made them conscious of the social disabilities and economic discrimination, they had been subjected to in the past centuries. Colonial regime by contrast seemed to be more open and egalitarian. This

created among them a different perception of history vis-à-vis that of the nationalists. As the nationalists glorified the traditional past as something like a golden age that was lost with the establishment of British rule, the Namasudras considered the colonial regime an improvement over the past. For there was no more the oppressive and contemptuous rule of the Hindu rajas, so that even the Sudras could now read the Vedas. The generous English made no distinction of caste and offered equal opportunities and equal protection of law to everybody, high and low. And hence, in this egalitarian rule, anyone could have education, acquire wealth and rise thereby in social status. *Pataka*, a Namasudra paper, published in 1916 a revealing editorial, which stated: "....We had been put to sleep by the blind Hindu kings who ruled over Hindu society. Today we have woken up from that slumber through the grace of the mighty British, who believe in the equality of men and not in caste...."

Any movement to overthrow this regime was, therefore, interpreted as attempt to put the clock back - as endeavours to revive the power of the high caste Hindus and reimpose their oppressive control over the society. And this consciousness, first born at the top, could easily filtrate downward, where there was already in existence a deep-rooted hatred and an attitude of defiance towards the authority of the higher castes.

This feeling of attachment to the colonial rule was also to a large extent due to the influence of the Christian missionaries, who had long been trying through their philanthropic activities to win over such depressed communities, the "human debris of India," as the Bishop of Madras described them. As the high caste educated people dashed their hopes of an expansion of Christianity, it was "the pariah community, and not the Brahmin," that began to occupy "the position of highest strategic value" for such missionary activities. In Eastern Bengal, during the famine of 1906, the areas which were most affected were the marshy regions of Faridpur and Bakarganj. The worst sufferers were the poorer classes of peasants who had no ploughs or land of their own and the poorer high caste *bhadralok* who depended for their livelihood entirely upon a small patrimony. The Swadesh Bandhab Samiti under the guidance of Aswini Kumar Dutta orgainsed relief work in the famine-stricken areas. But while the swadeshi relief fund, as it has been alleged, "was largely used for the benefit of the *bhadralok* classes," the Christian missionaries both Catholic and Protestant, did excellent work among the distressed Namasudra peasants of the *bil* tracts, in co-operation with the government officials. This naturally brought the missionaries closer to the Namasudras. But closest to them was perhaps a particular Australian Baptist missionary, Dr. C.S. Mead. The Orakandi School, which had started with humble resources on a plot of land, donated by Guruchand himself, needed further financial assistance for sustenance, as the Kayastha zamindar of the locality refused to help. Appeals were, therefore, sent to Mead, then stationed at the district headquarter of Faridpur. Orakandi

being "the most influential centre of the Namasudra world," the missionary felt that "this strategic centre should be occupied." In a meeting held at Orakandi in early 1905, Mead promised to help and pleaded for a piece of land, both for opening a school and a mission. Although the elder Namasudras and their priests were hesitant and suspicious about the ulterior motives of this missionary, the leader stood firm and himself donated a piece of land on which Mead started his mission in 1906, initially in a tent. Apart from teaching gospel to the Namasudras with the assistance of Rev. H. Sutton, Mead also began to run a charitable dispensary. The elementary school for boys was raised to the status of a high school, where about 200 lads came to study from different villages across rivers and marshes. A day school and a Sunday school for girls were opened under the supervision of Miss Tuck. The Widows' Home at Orakandi, looked after by nurse Thomson, provided shelter to a number of destitute Namasudra widows, while Miss Kamala Bose, a Christian Bengali young lady, started working for the upliftment of the Namasudra women at Gopalganj, about 20 miles away from Orakandi. All these activities were made possible by the local support that Mead received from Guruchand and his followers, which gave him a strong base in an area predominantly inhabited by the members of a disgruntled but ambitious untouchable caste. Before his departure from India, Mead, therefore, openly acknowledged: "In the various activities of my missionary life he (Guruchand) had made possible many things that without his backing could not have been carried through."

Expression of gratitude was, however, reciprocal. As a Namasudra paper put it, "....the Christians (are) lifting the rock from off us, and we are getting a chance to rise, but we do not know how to express the gratitude we so deeply feel." But as Mead realised, the Namasudras only learnt to "lift up their heads," but refused to "turn their heads to behold the Lamp of God and then....to bow their heads in living and lowly homage at His pierced feet." The Faridpur Mission could convert two Namasudra families before 1911. And this goes to show, as Rev. Sutton pointed out, the Namasudras "imbibe(d) just so much of the Christian spirit as....(would) enable them to forge ahead to a place of independence and respectability." But what the missionaries could more or less successfully achieve was to widen the cleavage between the nationalists and this ambitious social group. Political agitations were as much a problem of the missionaries as it was of the government, for they "widened the gulf between Indians and Europeans, thus setting the missionary in a very difficult position." Mead, therefore, projected himself as the benefactor of the Namasudras, won their gratitude, tried to ensure their loyalty to the government and on a number of occasions, acted as a liaison between the two.

But such endeavours could actually succeed because institutional incentives were constantly forthcoming from the colonial government. The British, as it seems, were trying through various measures to dilute the mounting intensity

of the anti-imperialist agitation during this period, and the best way to do this was to alienate sections of Indian society, as large as possible, from the nationalist movements by encouraging political separatism among the so-called 'backward classes,' simultaneously with the Muslims. The constant tendency of compartmentalising and stereotyping the Indian society in terms of primordial categories in the census reports, led to a reinforced caste-consciousness and caste solidarity. As the British thus tried to define the Indian society, the people in the lower rungs of the social structure tried to take advantage of that process in order to improve their position, at least in the imperial corpus of knowledge. The result was that the Indians, particularly those belonging to the lower castes, increasingly began to identify themselves in terms of caste, substituted better names for their old degrading caste appellations and claimed higher position for themselves in the ritual hierarchy. Census, for them, was an opportunity for getting formal recognition of their higher social claims denied by their caste superiors and such recognition, they also believed, would soften the attitude of the local society as well. It was planned at the time of the census of 1881, that "the castes should be classified by their social position" in the reports. But "the original arrangement was dropped," as the Census Superintendents were overwhelmed and bewildered by the enormous number of petitions they received, "complaining of the position assigned to castes to which the petitioners belonged." But in 1901, Herbert Risley, the Census Commissioner, actually tried to classify each caste according to its place in Hindu society, both in terms of local hierarchy and *varna* affiliation. This gave rise to a considerable agitation amongst the various lower castes, the Namasudras not excepted. Bhishmadev Das and several other Namasudras sent a representation, praying that their caste should be designated as Namasudra and the old despising name 'Chandal' should be deleted. The agitation was renewed when the census operations of 1911 were instituted, threatening disturbance of peace at different quarters.

So much consternation was not perhaps merely the result of social aspirations. It would not be an absolutely wild conjecture if we suppose that it was generated also by the more material expectations of institutional benefits, such as caste representation in public employment and elected bodies or reservation of seats in educational institutions. Such expectations were fostered in the late nineteenth century by the government policy of "special protection" for the Muslims, designed to ensure "due distribution of places of emoluments so as to prevent the depression of a numerous and influential class." Similar preferential treatment was being meted out to the backward castes as well, in other provinces of India. In 1881, the Bombay government, for example, had "laid down the important principle that in distributing public patronage endeavour should be made to secure a due admixture of the various races and castes in the service of Government." Such a policy was formulated, not merely to pay more attention to the special needs of the backward communities, but also to break the

monopoly of power enjoyed by the so-called higher castes, which supplied the largest number of participants in the nationalist agitations. In Bengal, the very partition of the province in 1905 was designed not merely to elevate the Muslim community from its backwardness, but at the same time to strike at the roots of the power of the high caste Bengali *bhadralok*, the principal troublemakers for the colonial government in the province. Hence the new administration of Eastern Bengal and Assam, through its employment and educational policies and favoured treatment to the Muslims sought to destroy what Richard Cronin has called the "class rule" by the Hindu landowning, money-lending, professional and clerical classes, mainly belonging to the three traditional higher castes, the Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas. And such an openly publicised policy of protective discrimination could hardly escape the notice of the ambitious Namasudras, whose hopes and aspirations were now sufficiently inflamed to guide them into the path of political separatism.

The nationalist leadership, on the other hand, whether moderate or extremist, could not offer any effective alternative social, economic or political programme for integrating the Namasudras or similar other lower castes with the rest of Hindu society and mobilise them into their political movements. The failure was quite apparent during the anti-partition agitation - the first major political movement since the beginning of the Namasudra protest.

Swadeshi Movement and Namasudra Response

In the political behaviour of the Namasudras during the early years of the swadeshi movement we can identify two basic features - alignment with the Muslims and loyalty to the British. Material calculations no doubt prompted such a course of action. But apart from this, there were certain other sentiments and influences involved as well. We learn from a poem "Musalman," published in *Pataka* in 1917, that the alliance between the Muslims and the Namasudras was viewed as a union of two outcaste peasant communities equally despised and exploited by the high caste Hindu gentry. And this served as an adequate justification for their decision of offering a joint resistance to a movement which was led and supported by such high caste Hindu landlords and expressing in no uncertain terms their loyalty to the British government.

The events of 1906, however, made the nationalist leadership aware of the situation and conscious of the fact that unless they could mobilise this large agrarian caste their movement had little chance of success. And this prompted them to undertake a series of attempts to secure their support, sometimes through persuasion and sometimes through use of force, as "social ostracism" which had become a very handy method of forcing reluctant people to observe swadeshi, had no effect on an untouchable caste having no social rights whatsoever.

In Faridpur in early 1907 Ambica Charan Mazumdar, the foremost among

the Swadeshi leaders of that district, visited different places in the Madaripur sub-division, one of the principal Namasudra areas and held a number of boycott meetings, which were reported to have been "fairly successful." In continuation of these initial efforts, the draft resolution of the proposed Faridpur District Conference, which was scheduled to commence on 13 July 1907, tried to make political use of an old grievance of the Namasudras against their being employed as scavengers in jails. The sixth resolution ran as follows:

> "...this conference strongly protests against the degrading treatment to which Namasudras as a class are wrongly subjected in the jails, and which is not only highly repugnant to their feelings, but also acts as a social stigma upon their caste and this conference strongly urges that regular sweepers should be provided for serving the jail population."

But the conference itself was prohibited by the Magistrate of Faridpur under section 5 of the Public Meetings Ordinance of 1907, when the promoters refused to delete certain other 'objectionable' parts of the resolution as suggested by the government. On this occasion, however, the Faridpur District Association had come into existence with Ambika Mazumdar as the President. In the second half of September, on the eve of the pujas, the Association circulated a printed letter calling upon shopkeepers to refrain from importing foreign goods for the pujas. At the same time Mazumdar undertook an extensive "tour through the south of the district, advocating purchase of country goods only for Durga Puja," although to avoid government interference he made no mention of "boycott." The political significance of this particular tour can be assessed properly if we bear in mind the demographic character of southern Faridpur, where most of the local Namasudras lived in the swamp areas.

Apart from such direct method of approach through political meetings, the Faridpur District Association took recourse to other means, which the government described as "a species of bribery" by which it tried to gain "an influence over villages where the swadeshi spirit had not a spontaneous and independent existence." As an example the case of the Dhalgram national school may be cited. In the village of Dhalgram, "inhabited almost entirely by Namasudras," a school was run in the house of a well-to-do member of the same caste with 37 pupils coming from the same community. In 1906, the schoolhouse being in a dilapidated condition, the Namasudras asked their landlords Chandra Bilash and Kunja Bilash Mukherjee for assistance, which was promised, provided they would take the swadeshi vow. Having no other resort the villagers agreed to oblige, and the school was saved. Later, when the Faridpur District Association was trying to gain control over primary education in the district, the school received a monthly grant of Rs. 2/-, on condition that the students would continue to take the vow.

In Bakarganj, Aswini Kumar Dutta and his Swadesh Bandhab Samiti were

making similar efforts to enlist the support of the Namasudras in the agitation. Village samitis were formed to mobilise the villagers and teach them the principles of self-help and self-government. For this purpose, arbitration samitis were started which decided cases and suits and curtailed their legal expenses. One such samiti is said to have operated successfully during the second year of the swadeshi movement in village Tarachar inhabited by the Namasudras who were thus saved from "the dreadful jaws of litigation." The villagers are said to have given up registering their documents and instead began to execute documents by putting thumb impressions in the presence of five mandals of the village. And if anybody denied the execution of the document, he was subjected to social discipline and punished.

Apart from this, in the following year the Swadesh Bandhab Samiti through its rural branches "made the most sustained and vigorous effort to enmesh the Muhammadan peasantry and the Namasudras in its net." They were induced to attend meetings and were promised social and other favours if they participated in the swadeshi movement. For this purpose, leaders like Aswini Dutta, Satish Chandra Chatterjee and other volunteers like Nishi Kanta Bose and Srish Chandra Ray, went round the interior of the district, delivering speeches which the government considered as of "the most objectionable character." The most important of such tours was perhaps the one undertaken by Aswini Dutta himself in Sarupkati and Jhalakati police stations in the rains of 1907, around the middle of June. He visited places like Masiani, Garangal, Kaukhali, Juluhar and Nazirpur, addressed largely attended meetings, had close talks with the Muslim and Namasudra peasants, persuaded them to use swadeshi goods and boycott English courts. Simultaneously with this, rumours were systematically spread in these areas that the oppressive "Assam laws" were going to be introduced soon, that the government would take over all lands, new taxes would be imposed on coconut and date trees, as well as on betel nut and plantain trees. Hindu widows would be forced to remarry and above all, people in large numbers would be packed off to Assam to serve as tea garden coolies. Political demonstrations also continued in the predominantly Namasudra areas such as the Gaurnadi thana. Along with this, pamphlets were also published, such as Swadeshi Sangeet, which stated that "the English mix the fat of the cow and the pig with salt" and "the bone of the cow" with sugar.

In the district of Dacca, however, the poor Namasudras were subjected to intimidation and coercion when found buying foreign goods during the puja holidays. A particularly flagrant instance of this occurred at Sholla, where in late October 1907, a party of young men visited the quarter inhabited by the Namasudras in a boat and conducted a series of door to door search with a view to seeing that no foreign goods were used. In one instance they are said to have tried to strip a woman of the cloth she was wearing on the ground that it was foreign and generally their proceedings were so violent that three distinct

prosecutions were initiated by the persons manhandled. But it is reported, that as the accused were chiefly young men of good birth and influence, the complainants were induced to withdraw most of their charges. The government feared that the prosecution might prove pointless except perhaps in the case of some of the minor offenders. And this was precisely what was to happen. In spite of the efforts of the government, only two persons could be sentenced to four months' imprisonment and the attempts to enforce the boycott by coercive means went on unabated. In fact, such coercion had become a common practice in a wide area of Eastern Bengal, particularly in districts like Bakarganj, Faridpur and Mymensingh where Hindu zamindars were strictly prohibiting the sale and use of foreign piece goods in their respective zamindaries "on pain of heavy fine or sound shoe-beating."

The Namasudra leaders like Guruchand, his son Sashi Bhushan and their associates were also active in counteracting such nationalist attempts. They assiduously tried to dissuade their caste people from joining the boycott movement on the ground that swadeshi was the slogan of the rich educated zamindars who had always in the past ignored the interests of the poor Namasudras. It was a movement of rich people for furthering their own self-interest and the poor peasants had no interests involved in it. The Partition would not affect the Namasudras, while its withdrawal would not bring any special benefit to them. On the contrary, the Namasudras might profit from the loyalty to the foreign rulers who believed in social equality. So the movement was entirely in the interest of the rich, while they wanted to put its burden on the shoulders of the poor Namasudras who purchased foreign goods only because of their cheapness. Those nationalist leaders, as Guruchand emphasized, who were now trying to secure their support for the swadeshi movement, had not uttered a single word in the past against zamindari oppression or against the inhuman treatment meted out towards them by the Brahmins and the Kayasthas. For a long time, the Namasudras had been the outcasts of the society. So only when they were given a place of honour, would they come forward with full vigour to serve the country. Hence, if the nationalists really wanted the Namasudras to support their political movement, they should first wage a battle to obliterate social inequalities, which they were not prepared to do.

The identification of the swadeshi movement with the high caste Hindu zamindars, whom the Namasudra peasants thoroughly hated, was quite natural. Many of the leaders had zamindaries in areas where Namasudras mainly served as tenants. Ambika Mazumdar had a zamindary in the swamp areas of Rajair in the Madaripur thana of Faridpur district, while Aswini Dutta's estate was in Batajore in Bakarganj, where Namasudras mainly served as *barga* tenants. Apart from these top leaders, if we look at the composition of the National Volunteers during this time, we will find that almost all of them were either

doctors or pleaders or else, sons of Hindu zamindars and their peons and lathials. In Namasudra majority areas, like Sarupkati, "nearly half the volunteers are said to be talukdars." Almost all the samitis and associations run in such areas of north and west Bakarganj were patronised by high caste Hindu *bhadralok*, the majority of whom were zamindars, talukdars, or howladars. The Dacca Anusilan Samiti had a similar high caste Hindu *bhadralok* orientation, although later on a few low caste persons were also inducted. In Bakarganj, it was often alleged that the leaders of the Swadesh Bandhab Samiti, like Aswini Dutta, Upendra Nath Sen and others were "specially active in using their powers as landlord" to organise boycott and discontent. Similar allegations, as we have seen earlier, were common in other districts as well, particularly in Dacca, Faridpur and Mymensingh.

Thus, in the Namasudra psyche the anti-partition agitation came to be increasingly associated with the high caste Hindu gentry with whom they had no identity of interest. The Government, on the other hand, was granting concessions in which the aspirations of a socially ambitious untouchable caste found possibilities of fulfillment. The announcement of the government that its employees would be henceforth recruited on the basis of the proportional numerical strength of the various communities raised new hopes in the minds of the educated Namasudras about further social and material advancement. Such admittance to the public service was regarded by them as "their first chance of rising in public estimation."

The endeavours of the Namasudra leadership, supported adequately by the government, therefore led to the expected political results. In Faridpur, the political speeches of Ambika Mazumdar advocating the use of swadeshi goods seem to have had little effect on the Namasudra peasantry and the Dhalgram National School was soon "reported to be defunct." In Bakarganj, the peasants in general, both lower caste Hindus and Muslims, had become indifferent and regarded the anti-government agitation merely as "something that the Babus are doing." In areas with major Namasudra concentration, like Pirojpur, Liverpool salt was being freely sold. And where they faced obstruction, such as in Goila in Gaurnadi thana, the Namasudra peasants "decided to set up a hat of their own as they cannot get British goods as freely as they wished." Such anti-swadeshi sentiments had taken over their counterparts in the neighbouring districts of Jessore and Khulna as well. In April 1908, two meetings, consisting of 700 to 800 Muslims and Namasudras, were held in Jessore in order to counteract the efforts of the swadeshi and a notice was circulated threatening to burn the houses of those who would not use foreign articles. In these areas however, the anti-swadeshi zeal had also taken the shape of a militant social protest. At a meeting of about 1000 Namasudras held at Narail in September 1907, it was decided that they should not serve the higher classes of Hindus. In Khulna, in village Tilak, around May 1908 the Namasudras combined with

the Muslims against the Brahmins and the Kayasthas in a quarrel over the performance of a religious ceremony and armed with sticks, spears and shields attacked a police party that came to the rescue of the latter.

The nationalists seem to have been aware of the developments and sufficiently conscious about the necessity of doing something. And therefore to salvage the situation, in 1908 they made renewed attempts to mobilise this community and the eighteenth resolution of the Bengal Provincial Conference, held at Pabna in February, spoke of giving "social privileges to the Namasudras, such as use of barbars, washermen and bearers." In continuation of this initial gesture, two meetings were held in the district of Faridpur on 1 and 2 March. The first meeting was attended by three to four thousand people, including Muslims and Namasudras, as well as other Hindus. The first speaker, G. G. Pattadar, a pleader from Rajbari, alleged that the partition would be followed by the abolition of the Permanent Settlement and the people would have to pay heavier taxes. To prevent this was needed a united resistance by all the sections of Indian society. And to achieve such social unity he asked the Hindus present there to allow social privileges to the Namasudras who had been reluctant to join the agitation of their high caste brethren out of a sense of social deprivation. Ambika Mazumdar, the next speaker, also explained to the Muslims and the Namasudras the advantages of using swadeshi goods and promised the latter that he would have their status raised if they gave up the use of foreign articles. In the second meeting as well he made similar appeals, which "are reported, however, to have had little effect on the people more particularly addressed."

Similarly in Bakarganj, the Swadesh Bandhab Samiti through its 159 village branches had been constantly trying to bring the Namasudra peasants into its organisation. This particular problem received special attention during the deliberations at the Barisal district Conference held on the 17th, the 18th and the 19th August, 1908. On the second day, Sricharan Sen moved the fifteenth resolution, which ran as follows: "This conference considers it necessary to spread education among the Namasudras whereby to improve their social condition." In moving the resolution, the speaker said that there would be no success in the political arena unless the condition of the Namasudras be improved. The government dismissed the agitation as nothing more than the effort of a few educated men who wished to attain power in the political field. To avoid such stigma as well as to make the movement more effective, the support of the lower classes had to be secured. For, it was quite impossible to agitate, as Sen argued, without the Namasudras who constituted the only fighting class of people among the Hindus of Bengal. There were twenty-three lakhs of them in the district of Bakarganj alone and the Christian missionaries were always after them. In order to neutralize such pernicious influences the Namasudras had to be given some social privileges. They desired to have their clothes washed by the Hindu washermen and Sen could see no reason to deny

this. For, if the people could claim swaraj to have equal rights and privileges with the Englishmen, why then should the Namasudras not claim this concession? Hence to obtain swaraj, he urged the higher classes of people to make some concessions to the lower classes as well. The resolution was seconded by Purna Chandra De, who went so far as to compare the samurai disturbances in Japan with those of the common classes in India, when he was stopped by president Aswini Kumar Dutta. Baikantha Nath Mal, one of the few educated Namasudras who attended the conference, also supported the resolution. He explained the present state of his community and said that the dhobis had no reason to refuse their services. In addition to this he also pleaded for the assistance of the higher castes for the spread of education among the members of his caste. Two other Namasudras, Mohini Mohan Das of Chandshi and Aswini Kumar Haldar of Garangal also supported the resolution, which was carried without any opposition.

The third day of the meeting was entirely devoted to the question of "improvement and reformation of society." But as it appears from the different speeches delivered on this day, of all social problems the one, which monopolised the attention of almost all the speakers, was the degraded condition of the Namasudras. Surendra Nath Sen of Gaurnadi expressed his views in favour of abolishing the caste system altogether; so long as this was not done, as he argued, political success would continue to elude, for it needed brotherly feelings between all classes. Satish Chandra Chatterjee, one of the closest associates of Aswini Dutta, spoke at length about the low social position of the Namasudras and frankly admitted that many of them were anti-swadeshi simply because they were despised by all the sections of Hindu society. Hence in order to secure their political support they had to be given certain social privileges. Initially, as his simple solution was, the barbers had to be persuaded to shave the Namasudras. Sricharan Sen added to this a proposal for securing the services of the washermen and some of the zamindars present in the meeting, like Upendra Nath Sen Mahalanabis of Basanda, Bhubaneswar Roy Chowdhury of Kalaskathi and Sarada Kumar Roy Chowdhury of Rahumatpur promised to see that the barbers and washermen serve the Namasudras in their respective zamindaries.

It is important to note here, that the list of people who attended the Barisal District Conference on 17-19 August 1908 shows that an overwhelming majority of them belonged to the three Hindu upper castes; but none of them uttered a single word about accepting food and water from the hands of the Namasudras - a social demand articulated by the latter since the early 1870s. Instead they found a handy scapegoat and satisfied their conscience by shifting the responsibility on to the shoulders of the barbers and washermen. Apart from a few hollow promises, neither in the speeches of Ambika Mazumdar nor in those delivered at the Barisal District Conference, was there any concrete programme for the social and economic advancement of the Namasudra

peasants. Such a lack of serious intention was clearly discernible also in a speech delivered at a Namasudra conference in the middle of 1908 by Pyary Sankar Dasgupta, an extremist leader of Bogra. He advised the Namasudras not to quarrel with the higher castes, for such feeling of animosity would make it more difficult for them to attain a higher social status. They should eschew their sectarianism and unite with the rest of the society under the banner of the Indian nation. But what would they receive in return and how they would improve their material condition and social position? His answer to this difficult question was rather simple: "Help yourself and God will help you."

Census of 1911 and Political Separatism

With the onset of the census operations, the whole Namasudra movement and the nationalist response to it began to take a new turn. Since the meeting with the Lieutenant Governor in 1907, campaign was being organised by the Namasudras for securing social acceptance of their new, more pleasing, caste name in place of Chandal, the old despised one. The campaign was locally organised by Shyamlal Biswas of Jessore, Ramkinkar Ray, Dr. Dinabandhu Badoi, Dr. Kalicharan Mandal of Dacca, Bhismadev Das, Purna Chandra Mallik and Dr. Tarini Charan Bala of Faridpur, under the overall leadership of Guruchand Thakur. When society refused to respond favourably, they turned to the Census Commissioner. They were entered in the census tables of 1891 as "Namasudra or Chandal" and in those of 1901 as "Namasudra (Chandal)." But now on the eve of the Census of 1911, Dr. Mead suggested to Guruchand that scores of applications should be sent to the census authorities for the rectification of the returns. Hence messages were sent from Orakandi to different centres from where local leaders sent their separate applications to the Census Commissioner, E. A. Gait, then residing in Punjab, to the effect that they should be returned in the census reports not as 'Chandal,' but as 'Namasudra.' The application, which was sent from Orakandi, was recommended by Mead himself. The local government officials also seem to have supported them on this particular issue. The result was that, in the report of 1911, they were entered as just 'Namasudra;' the hated appellation 'Chandal' was completely omitted.

The census agitation sometimes involved hostilities between the higher and the lower castes; but what concerned the nationalist leadership was not this social tension, but the political implications of such a movement. The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, by conceding the demand of the Muslim community for separate representation, had stimulated similar aspirations for separate electorates in the minds of many other social groups. The Namasudras were among them. And the apprehension does not seem to be without adequate ground in view of the following petition, which the government received from the Namasudra community at about this time:

> "We beg to add that, though our religious rites and their observances and social customs are similar to those of high caste Brahmins, we have not the slightest connection with any of the Hindu communities. We are not allowed to join them in their social and religious ceremonies. They have been continually looking down upon us with contempt and malice; have kept us under subjection and total ignorance. We have been smarting under their yoke of bondage. It is absolutely absurd to anticipate that they would, in future, mix with us in social and religious performances. Thus we desire to be recognised by the Government as entirely a different community having separate claim to political privileges like Muhammadans."

Such manifest and unmistakable signs of political separatism were probably also due to a notorious circular of E. A. Gait, the Census Commissioner, that the 'depressed classes' would be enumerated separately in the coming census. It at once became the target of attack by the nationalists who saw in it other political motives as well. There was a general impression prevalent among the Hindu politicians and the press that "Hindus as a class were not receiving, at the hands of the Government, the amount of justice and fair play which their numbers, education and importance deserve....." There were even proposals for the establishment of an All India Hindu League for the protection of Hindu interests. The Namasudra movement in this context became vitally important to them as they desired "to use Namasudra agency to turn the balance against Muhammadans in East Bengal in case of necessity." In Gait's circular, therefore, the nationalists saw a clear political motive, allegedly prompted by the Muslim League, to reduce the numerical superiority of the Hindus by the non-recognition in the approaching census of certain untouchable castes as members of Hindu society. The circular met with a strong opposition from all sections of the Hindu press, and the interference of both the retiring and the incoming Viceroys was sought in the matter.

Simultaneously with such attacks on the controversial circular, the nationalists also attempted to win influence among these untouchable castes and tried to eliminate their suspicions and thoughts of political separatism. The nationalist press expressed a good deal of sympathy with them in view of the many social disabilities under which they laboured and the agitations started by the Namasudras, the Bhui Malis and others for the removal of these disabilities received considerable support. The extremist paper, *Praja Sakti* declared: "We are on the eve of a social revolution.... Talk of caste distinctions when India is a free country, and not now. Irresistible as the ocean tide the Sudras come on. They appeal to the greatest force of our times...the conscience of the civilised man." The *Barisal Hitaishi,* another extremist paper observed: "All those who have eyes to see must have noticed how a grave wave of dissolution has touched

the conservative Hindu Society, ...willy-nilly, consciously or unconsciously, all people are being drawn into the vortex of this agitation,...God alone is to be the leader of this impending social revolution." The Charu Mihir advocated social reform from a belief that unless some reforms were effected in Hindu society, the Hindus could not hope to secure political rights, and would deprive their society of the means of their own conservation. "Government officials do not attach much importance to their agitation," it remarked, "because of their indifference to the distress that prevails among the depressed classes." To win over the political support of these depressed sections of the society, the nationalists, along with such press propaganda, also organised meetings at different places. One such meeting took place on December 13, 1910, among the Namasudras in Nadia. It was held in the house of Sashi Bhushan Thakur, son of Guruchand, at village Kamalpur in Kumarkhali thana. Five or six hundred people assembled and resolutions were passed that the inferior caste of Namasudras should also enjoy the same privileges as other sections of Hindu society. The meeting was presided over by Sarada Charan Mitra, an ex-Judge of High Court, who was at that time organising a pan-Hindu movement in order to counteract the activities of the Muslim League.

Early next year, Gait's circular was withdrawn through a press communiqué, which stated that there would be no departure from the established practice regarding the enumeration of castes. For the nationalists the immediate cause of anxiety was removed but a concern for the future remained. Fortunately however, soon they found an opportunity, which they tried, in all earnestness, to utilise in order to win over the Namasudras, who had been the most articulate group among the 'depressed classes' in pressing their separatist political demands. At this particular point of time, the working alliance between the Muslims and the Namasudras nearly broke down due to the outbreak of a series of riots between the two communities at different places of Bengal. The first of these took place in May, 1911, in the districts of Jessore and Khulna where large scale disturbance broke out over fifty miles of territory. This region was notorious for land disputes leading to violent riots, and the immediate occasion of the present one was also a dispute over the possession of a piece of land. The influential individuals of both the communities became closely involved in this agrarian dispute and actually organised the attacking parties. In Jessore, the pucca house of the leader of the Namasudra community, Umesh Chandra Sardar, was partially burned and two respected Muslims, who 'rode about on ponies directing the operations,' were arrested in this connection. Other similar incidents, although of lesser magnitude, were reported in other regions as well. In June, at Jaynagar hat in Faridpur district, an altercation over the damage done by some cows trespassing in a field, was about to cause a serious riot between the Muslims and the Namasudras, as the two parties assembled to the number of 400 on each side and prepared to attack each other. Bloodshed was

however, avoided as wiser counsel prevailed among them when a police party arrived. During the same month, the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet reported a riot between the two communities at Chaudhuri Bazar. A Muslim mob, numbering over a thousand and armed with spears and lathis, attacked the Namasudras and damaged their houses. According to the Deputy Commissioner, it was one of the offshoots of the movement among the Namasudras to improve their social status by refusing to serve as boatmen or palki-bearers. This irritated their former Muslim employers and the dispute about the impounding of a Namasudra's cow trespassing in the field of a Muslim led first to the Muslims being beaten up by the Namasudras and then, a few days later, to this fierce riot. The names of 39 Muslims involved in the disturbances were obtained and 11 of them were arrested and sent for trial.

So, on all the three occasions, we find, petty disputes were apparently enough to cause enormous tension leading to widespread violence. Only in Sylhet there was some background of a prolonged strained relationship between the two communities. Whether any agent provocateur was involved in one or all of these cases is a matter of conjecture in view of the paucity of information. But the Hindu press wasted no time in seizing this opportunity to win over Namasudras by supporting their cause and condemning Muslim rowdyism. A leading article, which appeared in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on May 25th, alleged that an inflammatory and "filthily abusive" pamphlet entitled *The Cow and Hindu-Musalman* actually provoked the Muslims to attack the Namasudras and might cause further communal violence. Although the government wanted to describe these riots as purely local in nature, the Hindu leaders wanted to tag it to the greater question of Hindu-Muslim relationship, as Surendranath Banerjea saw in them "further evidence of the baneful effects of the Partition."

The controversial pamphlet was, however, forfeited in June under the Indian Press Act. The nationalists now felt the more urgent need to do something more constructive. The United Bengal Provincial Conference which was held in Faridpur on the 29th and 10th of September, 1911, therefore, resolved "to take earnestly in hand" an elaborate programme of "social reform, especially (for) the elevation of the neglected classes." Lt. Colonel U. N. Mukherjee, the author of *The Dying Race* (1909), was specially invited to participate in the 'Social Conference,' which was supposed to organise "attempts to improve the status of the Namasudras and other 'depressed classes' and to bring them into the fold of organized Hinduism." But the ever-widening gap between promise and achievement gave the Namasudras adequate reasons to suspect the sincerity of such attempts.

The Brahmo Samaj had also started social work among the untouchables through its Depressed Classes Mission founded in 1909 under the guidance of Sibnath Shastri. It started its first centre at Beras, a Namasudra village in the district of

Dacca. And then in different areas of Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna, the Mission under the able leadership of people like Harinarayan Sen, did admirable work among the Namasudras and others, providing them with free education and free medical care. But even then, the record of the Depressed Classes Mission was poor compared with the Christian Missionary efforts. And in 1911, at its annual meeting held in Calcutta, it was openly admitted that the Mission had not made much progress due to lack of finance.

But mere excuses were not enough to impress an ambitious group like the Namasudras, who were striving to put an end to their poverty, illiteracy and social disabilities. To them the record was more important and an unimpressive record was taken as an index of insincerity. The result was further alienation, the extent of which can easily be measured from the history of the two papers related to the Namasudra movement. The *Namasudra Suhrid*, a "non-political" monthly, published from Orakandi, the main nerve-centre of the movement, was the original organ of the caste. It was edited by Aditya Kumar Chaudhuri, a Namasudra pandit of the Upper Primary School, Rasiani (Faridpur); the proprietor was Sashi Bhusan Thakur, son of Guruchand, and the publisher was his younger brother Surendranath. In late 1908 another weekly entitled *Namasudra* was started in Dacca in order to further the interests of the caste. It was owned, edited and published by Keshab Chandra Das of Chandshi, a Namasudra by caste who had studied up to the Entrance class at the Arya Mission School, Calcutta. The tone of the paper was in general "moderate," but often it showed a tendency of attacking the high caste Bengali government servants, but not the government, for allegedly neglecting the interests of the Namasudras. From the 31st March, 1910, however, the paper ceased to be printed, only to be revived once again from the 14th of July, when the staff of the Jhalakati National School took it over in order "to gain over the Namasudras to the agitation..." From now on it was edited by Anath Bandhu Sen, a Baidya teacher of the Jhalakati National School, and was published by a Kayastha of Ujirpur, Lakshmi Charan Das. Around 1911, its tone was openly "anti-government and disloyal" and its well-publicised avowed object was to mobilise "the Namasudra class who were indifferent to the swadeshi agitation." The *Namasudra Suhrid*, however, retained its earlier character and organisation and continued to be "non-political" and "chiefly social." In this context, what is important to note is the ever-increasing popularity of the more loyal *Namasudra Suhrid* and the declining circulation of *Namasudra* since its take over by the nationalists. In 1908, the circulation of *Namasudra* was 500, while that of *Suhrid*, 550; in 1910, the year of the nationalist take over, the circulation of *Namasudra* went down to 300, while that of *Suhrid* to 450; but in 1911, the year of the Census, while the circulation of Namasudra remained at 300, that of Suhrid shot up to 700. The figures are perhaps adequate to give us a clear idea about the growing alienation of the Namasudras, at least the educated Namasudras, from the cause of nationalism around the year 1911.

However, in the same year nationalists had a real opportunity to win over the Namasudras by utilising Gokhale's Compulsory Elementary Education Bill. On the 16th March, 1911, Gohkale introduced his Bill in the Legislative Council "to make better provision for the extension of elementary education" by introducing gradually "the principle of compulsion." The government response was not at all favourable. The government of Bengal was "opposed not merely to the specific provisions, but also to the introduction, at the present juncture, of the general principles embodied in the Bill." Sir Lancelot Hare was more categorical in pointing out the actual political implications of the Bill. In his opinion, it was "premature and impolitic" for it would "promote discontent and social unrest among the masses." Moreover, it would inevitably involve special taxation, which would breed further discontent-more especially because there was already a possibility of additional taxation to make good the loss of opium revenue. The nationalists gave full-throated support to the Bill. The United Bengal Provincial Conference in September and the Indian National Congress at its Calcutta session in December, adopted resolutions in its favour and urged the government to enact it into law. The local organisations and their leaders were at the same time active in mobilising popular support in favour of the Bill. But the government's fear of a social revolution arising out of compulsory education was fully shared by the orthodox section of society. A Hindu zamindar could not conceal his apprehensions when he wrote to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, that the "system of the wholesale spread of education of the masses...will cause a great and violent disturbance in every phase of the present settled order of things; and will throw the whole country, as it were, out of its equilibrium, and such a system...will not only...spoil the temper of the masses, but will tend to upset and disturb all the harmonious relations now existing between various classes and communities, domestic relations not escaping its disturbing influence." Although the bill was almost unanimously supported in some of its features by the vernacular press, the organs of the orthodox section of the community viewed it with considerable misgiving. As they apprehended, it was likely to foment social unrest within the community by imparting to the lower classes a smattering of education and imbuing them with a spirit of insubordination and intolerance of control by the higher classes. "It is therefore better," wrote *Hindu Ranjika*, one such paper, "that their children should remain altogether illiterate than have a very slight smattering of education."

But such a proposal of the orthodox Hindus could not be considered as 'better,' by those who thought that for centuries they had been "smarting under their yoke of bondage." In fact the Compulsory Elementary Education Bill was the only concrete nationalist proposal in which the Namasudras saw possibilities of fulfillment of their aspirations. Their organ *Namasudra Suhrid* wholeheartedly

welcomed the bill because of the chances of an elevation of their social status through primary education. It ascribed the backwardness of the community to poverty which was perpetuated over years, as their young men without any education had no other alternative but to pursue their hereditary occupations. The only agency through which the poor Namasudra children could get some education was the missionaries; but their efforts were often misrepresented. So in this grim situation the proposed extension of primary education on the basis of compulsion was all the more welcome to them as to the other depressed sections of the society.

But the nationalist leadership failed to make effective use of this sentiment. In December, 1911, came the Durber Declaration about the annulment of Partition. And in their jubilation, the nationalist leaders failed to take note of the possibilities of using this issue in order to win over the sympathies of the Namasudras and other 'depressed classes' whose political support was necessary not only for the swadeshi movement but for the success of the later political movements as well. Guruchand was honoured by the government for his consistent loyalty and Namasudra separatism became far more firmly entrenched so much so that even Gandhi's appeal in the days of non-cooperation could not make any considerable breakthrough.

Conclusion

The Namasudra movement was thus a story of social segregation, protest and political separatism. It weakened the nationalist movement in a way similar to the bid for power by the separatist Muslim politicians. The majority of the Namasudra agriculturists dwelt in the uninhabitable swamps of Eastern Bengal. The constant interaction with a hostile nature bred in them a spirit of independence and made them a virile, industrious and martial-spirited people. A growing sense of self-respect, arising out of their gradual transformation into a peasant community in course of the nineteenth century, made them conscious of the contempt Hindu society treated them with and the economic exploitation the high caste Hindu gentry subjected them to. This consciousness first of all led to an articulate protest against the social and economic injustices perpetrated on them for centuries. Later it took the shape of political separatism, a strategy that appeared, in an age of institutional politics, to be most appealing and effective to the leaders of a community striving to come out of its backwardness. However, in this movement, we may detect two distinct levels of consciousness and two different levels of movement, but at the same time an effective symbiosis between the two.

The Namasudra movement, it is true, was organised from the top, by a tiny, prosperous and educated section. These people who had moved up in social position in a secular context soon began to feel the gap still existing between

their secular status and ritual position. But they were yet to evolve a distinct social identity of their own and had by no means lost their linkages with the less fortunate peasant population belonging to their caste. They were as yet too weak to form a separate political interest group and, because of their extremely low ritual position, too distinct from the high caste Hindu educated community to make a front with them, to press for their political demands. On the contrary, having little economic surplus in their hands and being ill-equipped to take advantage of the political concessions in competition with the high caste educated Hindus, they did not feel any attraction for the political demands of the nationalists. They began to think in terms of special privileges from the government, which they thought would benefit the entire Namasudra community vis-à-vis the more privileged upper caste Hindus and thus ensure a corporate social mobility in the upward direction. Hence they decided to move from pure social protest of the late nineteenth century to political separatism in the early twentieth. The promise of patronage with the prospect of being treated as equals, created among them a different perception of history and a different attitude to the colonial government. The present seemed to be an improvement over the past and indicative of a better future, when there would be no more discrimination on the basis of caste and the on-going system of distribution of wealth and power would be restructured to allow them a share too. They opted for loyalty to the British government, for it seemed to be the best way to ensure this desired readjustment of the social balance.

However, at another level, in the consciousness of the peasantry at the bottom, much more evident was a spirit of 'protest.' They seem to have very little idea about institutional concessions which they could hardly take advantage of. But what they could immediately feel and realise was the fact of social degradation and economic exploitation perpetrated on them by the high caste Hindu gentry. A growing self-awareness of an emerging peasant community led to a spontaneous protest against it. As a mark of defiance of the social authority of the higher castes, they refused to accept degrading menial jobs or to serve as boatmen and palanquin-bearers for them. And where the oppression of the gentry crossed all tolerable limits, they looted bazars or broke into the houses of their landlords. When the government was helpful, as during the commutation proceedings, they stood by it and took advantage of the situation. But when the state machinery came to the rescue of their harassed landlords, they would not hesitate to take up *lathis* and *daos* against the police. This self-awareness of the peasantry was to some extent the result of the efforts of the leadership at the top, which could also effectively channelise the attitude of defiance it generated into a well-organised movement. Using their caste, religious and kinship ties and by highlighting the plight of the poor Namasudra peasantry, as well as articulating their grievances against the high caste gentry, they successfully mobilized the masses behind their political programme. The organisational

network of the *Matua* sect, though informal at this stage, brought broader community consciousness and greater social mobilisation. It brought about a symbiosis between the two levels of 'protest' mentality, one against low ritual position and continuing exclusion from the sources of wealth and power, and the other against social humiliation and economic exploitation. The common object of their opposition was the high caste Hindu. And the colonial government, the enemy of their enemy, was their natural ally.

The nationalists, both moderates and extremists, failed to evolve an alternative political ideology rooted in mass consciousness. They were not, as we have seen, indifferent to the social developments among such lower castes as the Namasudras; nor could they afford to neglect the phenomenon of political separatism growing among them out of a sense of social and economic deprivation. But the prejudices of the society they belonged to and the economic interests of the classes they came from stood in their way and prevented them from offering any effective social or economic programme for integrating these aggrieved lower castes with the rest of Hindu society. The promises they put forth soon proved to be empty ones and failed to convince a socially ambitious community such as the Namasudras. They were no longer prepared to wait. As their aspirations could not be accommodated within the process of the freedom struggle, they preferred to stay away from it. They were even prepared to oppose it, if in such a course of action they could see possibilities of fulfillment of their own social ambitions. And this loyalty was systematically encouraged, on the one hand, by the Christian missionaries through their benevolent activities and on the other, by the British government, through its policy of fanning the latent tensions of Hindu society by occasionally giving material concessions to the 'depressed classes' and consistently showing verbal sympathy for their grievances. All these tendencies later on led to the development of a separate backward classes identity with the Namasudras as the main force of the movement in Bengal.

(A few paragraphs and references have been removed from the original due to space constraint)

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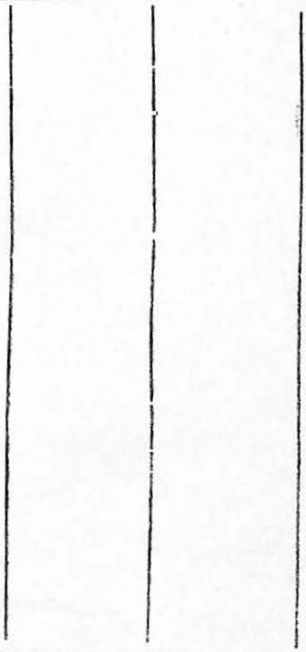

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