

# THE FIRST PROTEST OF NAMASUDRAS OF COLONIAL BENGAL

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Namasudras were lowly positioned in social stratum among Hindus and were branded as untouchables in Bengal. The humiliation of ostracism and isolation, the ordeal of being deprived of their rights created a strong resentment among the Namasudras against the upper caste. In 1871-72, the Namasudras for the first time attempted to organise a movement against the upper castes. Although it was politically insignificant, nevertheless it represented an endeavour to destabilize the hegemonic ritual order and an implicit effort to rise in social scale among the Hindus. The protest was against a social condition that imposed several disabilities like low status, lack of social honour, no education facilities, poor economic conditions etc.*

**Keywords:** *Caste, Rights, Oppression, Self Respect, Disability, Protest, Sect, Hegemony, Hindu social order, Chandals*

## INTRODUCTION

The Namasudra refers to a community which previously had various synonyms like Chandals, Chanrals, Nama etc. It is said that they derived their names from Namas or Lomosa Muni. There is another history of the Namasudras that they were a non- Aryan caste of East Bengal, engaged for the most part in beating drums and cultivation<sup>1</sup>. The word 'Chandala' was used as a generic term to refer to all the lower caste people. The derivation of the name Chandals is uncertain. The Namasudras previously known as Chandals of Bengal covered six districts of Bakerganj, Faridpur, Dacca, Mymensingh, Jessore and Khulna. According to 1901 census more than 75% of this caste population resided in the above mentioned areas. The concentration of this population was more in the swampy areas of North West Bakerganj, south Faridpur, and the adjoining Narail, Magura subdivisions of Jessore and Sadar and Bagerhat sub- division of Khulna. This geographical position was their principal source of strength for this community and the loss of it after 1947 was considered as one of the causes of the decline of their movement<sup>2</sup>. The following statement shows the distribution of Chandals in 1872-1881. The Namasudras were lowly positioned in social stratum among Hindus and were branded as untouchables. According to HH Risley, "Manu branded Chandala as the lowest of mankind sprung from illicit intercourse of a Shudra man with a Brahman woman whose touch defiles the pure and who have no ancestral rites. The Chandals of Bengal invariably call themselves Namasudras and with characteristic jealousy the higher ranks in the caste hierarchy apply the name Chandal to the lower, which in their turn, pass it on to the *dom*, considered to be the lowest in the hierarchy. Chandals have Brahmins of their own who preside at religious and social ceremonies, but they are popularly called Barna Brahmin or Chandaler Brahmin in Eastern Bengal. They are not received on equal terms by other members of the priestly castes. Their washerman (dhopa) and barbers (napit) are, necessarily, Chandals as the ordinary dhopa and napit decline to serve the priest of the Chandals. In Western Bengal, on the other hand, Chandals have their clothes washed by dhopa (washerman) who work for other castes also. At village festivals, the Chandal is treated as no higher in the rank than Bhumali and Chamar and is obliged to put off his shoes before he sits down in the assembly"<sup>3</sup>.

During nineteenth century rapid reclamation of marshy tracts of Eastern Bengal brought a huge transformation in their unsettled life. It provided the Namasudras with an opportunity to raise them economically as well as physically transform their amphibious existence to settled cultivators. Before

<sup>1</sup> SinghKS (ed), People of India –West Bengal , volume-xxxiii, part two, Anthropological Survey of India , Seagull Books ,Calcutta, 2008, pg-919

<sup>2</sup> BandopadhyaySekhar, Caste, Class and Politics in Colonial Bengal: A Case Study of Namasudra Movement of 1872-1937 in Caste and Class in India, edited by K.L Sharma, Rawat Publication, Jaipur, 1998, pg-21

<sup>3</sup> RisleyHH, Tribes and caste of Bengal, official edition, circulated for criticism, 1883, pg-184-188

reclamation most of the Namasudras lived primarily by boating and fishing, working as ploughmen, slaves, coolies<sup>4</sup>. But by the beginning of twentieth century and with the reclamation of marshy areas, majority of them followed agriculture as their livelihood. Apart from agriculture, the Namasudras could be found in other professions also, like carpenters, oilmen, blacksmith, goldsmith, fisherman etc. At the beginning of twentieth century some of them entered the ranks of the burgeoning industrial working class of Bengal. Some were traders, some were engaged in river borne trade, some joined higher professions like doctors, lawyers etc. But majority of them remained agriculturist<sup>5</sup>.

Unlike their upper caste counterparts the Namasudra women work mostly in fields alongside men, sell goods at markets etc. They did not lead a secluded life like that of upper caste women. They enjoyed relatively more freedom of movement as compared to higher castes women. Widow Remarriage was quite common among Namasudras. The phenomenon of Widow Remarriage was common among lower castes as they were not as obsessed with managing or controlling their women's sexuality.<sup>6</sup>

The rapid reclamation of the marshes and the forest in Eastern Bengal though transformed Namasudras into a settled peasant community but the principal surplus generated by such reclamation went to landowning classes i.e the high caste Hindu like (Brahman, Kayastha, Baidya) and high class Saiyyed Muslims<sup>7</sup>. Apart this various forms of oppression was perpetrated on Namasudra peasantry by high caste Hindu landlords for example putting pressure on peasants by increasing sub in feudation, non fixing of rent, imposition of illegal cesses, and the conversion of low cash rent paying tenures into high produce rent paying *barga* tenures and later *dhankarari* tenures. In spite of many hurdles small section of Namasudras managed to prosper economically by taking the advantage of those land-owning high castes Hindus and high class Muslims who could not personally supervise their estates in marshy tracts. By late nineteenth and the early twentieth century some Namasudras of Eastern Bengal became rich peasants or a cultivating tenure holder or *jotedar* or *granthidar*<sup>8</sup>.

In late nineteenth century a major change took place which helped few Namasudras to rise up in the economic ladder. During this time, the cultivation of jute was encouraged by the government; experimental farms were established in Dacca in 1872-73. There was wide misconception that cultivation of jute would lead to impoverishment of soil. But with experimental farming the cultivators discovered that the crop did not impoverish the soil to the extent they apprehended. Gradually, jute was grown in many areas like northern Bakerganj, southern Faridpur, Jessore, and Khulna. These areas were mainly inhabited by Namasudras. As a result of cultivation of jute, a minority of Namasudras had become prosperous.

Many Namasudras became money lenders and some started working as middleman or *byaparisin* the internal river borne trade of Eastern Bengal. In course of time many prosperous Namasudras received education and a handful of them joined higher professions. But majority of Namasudras remained agriculturist. In 1911, 89 per cent Namasudras had rental income, only 3.83 per cent participated in trade and 1.04 per cent was in higher profession.<sup>9</sup> The first step towards the spread of education among Namasudra was taken in 1880 when a pathshala (school) was founded in Orakandi, exclusively for educating Namasudra children. Later on many efforts were made in various districts to spread education; sometimes even Christian missionaries helped the Namasudras in their knotty mission of spreading literacy<sup>10</sup>. But the progress was very slow. The Namasudras could not make progress on professional front because of the competition they faced from well equipped and privileged upper caste. In order to come at a par with upper caste and get rid

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<sup>4</sup> Bengal District Gazetteers, Bakerganj, Calcutta, 1918, pg- 34-36, J C Jack, Bengal District Gazetteer, Jessore, Calcutta 1912, pg-35, LSSO Malley, Census of India 1881, Vol-1&2, Census of India 1891 Vol -3

<sup>5</sup> see Bandopadhyay Sekhar, 1997, pg12-19

<sup>6</sup> Mani Braj Ranjan, Debrahmanising History- Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society Chapter-3, Medieval Mukti Movements Of the Sabalern Saint-Poets, Pg-202, Manohar Publishers, Delhi, 2008

<sup>7</sup> Census of India, 1911, vol V, Part II, pp 370-373 Table XVI, J C Jack, Bengal District Gazetteers, Bakerganj, Calcutta- 1918, pg-35, Report on the census of the district of Backergunge 1891, pg-7, report on census of district of Faridpur, 1891, pg-12-13

<sup>8</sup> Bandopadhyay Sekhar, 1997, pg-26, jotedar- middleman

<sup>9</sup> Census of India, 1911, Vol-V, Part I, Subsidiary Table VI, p-373

<sup>10</sup> Das N.C, 1368 BS, pg-33

of the handicap that they were suffering from due to age old social discrimination and economic exploitation, they began demanding for special privileges. This brought them close to British government . In late of nineteenth century there was transition from Chandala to Namasudra identity. The first meeting of Namasudra was organised for their upliftment was held in 1881 in Dattadanga village of Mollahat subdivision of Khulna district at the house of Namasudra Zamindar Ishwar Gayen. The meeting was presided over by Gurucharan.<sup>11</sup> It is said that around this time the new name Namasudra began to gain currency. At the time of Census operation of 1891, the Namasudras submitted several petitions for recognition of their new caste name. Census for them was an opportunity for getting formal recognition of their higher social claims denied by the higher caste and such recognition they believed would soften the attitude of people belonging to higher caste, towards them. Thus in the Census report of 1891, the demand of Namasudras was not fully met as in the caste table they were again referred as “Namasudra or Chandal”<sup>12</sup>. But the word Namasudra was used for the first time showing a popularity of the name and its official legitimation. The members of this community now started strongly objecting to the use of the expression Chandal<sup>13</sup>. In 1901, Herbert Risley, the Census Commissioner tried to classify each caste according to its place in Hindu society, both in terms of local hierarchy and Varna affiliation. The Namasudras of the districts of Dacca, Faridpur, Bakerganj, Mymensingh, Jessore, Pabna and several members of Namasudra Association of Orakandi pleaded to the government for dropping of word “Chandal”. In the Census of 1901, the Namasudras were referred as “Namasudra (Chandal)”<sup>14</sup>. The higher caste people ridiculed them for making such demand but the local officials, Officiating Magistrate of Bakerganj, Magistrate in charge of census- work in Faridpur all supported the Namasudras.<sup>15</sup> In 1907, a delegation under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur met the governor of east Bengal and Assam. The delegation included Bhishmadeb Das and Shashi Bhusan Thakur of Orakandi, Dr. TariniCharanBala, Radhamohan Biswas and Purnachandra Mallik of Gopalganj. They apprised Governor about the despised and degraded condition of Namasudras and also appealed to use “Namasudra” instead of “Chandal” in Census.<sup>16</sup> In 1911 Census report, the word “Namasudra” was used.<sup>17</sup>

### **The first protest for self respect**

Thenamasudras were fighting continuously to hold a respectable status in the hindu social order. There was social awakening, religious and political movements among the lower caste people in Colonial Bengal and many other parts of colonial India may be seen as the outcome of two different reasons. The underlying reason behind these movements was perhaps due to the utter negligence of the downtrodden on account of their economic backwardness, social marginalisation, lack of proper education and inhuman treatment meted out to them by the upper-class people of the society. In the first instance their movement was aimed at attaining equal status with that of the higher castes of society. But keeping in view a realistic acknowledgement of their social status while trying to get rid of endless inhuman treatment given to them from various angle, they shifted the focus of their movement to acquiring higher education, employment, economic enrichment, and political power in due course. The socio religious movement of the downtrodden belonging to the Namasudra community started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It took the shape of the Matua Movement in colonial Bengal.

Besides the depressed social situation of the Namasudras, it was also the social, political, economic and religious attitudes and supremacy of the upper class elites that was responsible for the protest movement of the namasudras. The practice of untouchability in the Hindu social order and humiliation of human dignity to the lowest level by the upper class was very much common not only in Bengal but also in other parts of India. The humiliation of ostracism and isolation, the ordeal of being deprived of their rights created a strong resentment among the Namasudras against the upper caste. A section of Namasudras who were rich and educated became conscious of the social disabilities that they suffered due to centuries of social and

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<sup>11</sup> See, Das NC, 1368 pg-38

<sup>12</sup> Malley L.S.S.O, Bengal District Gazetteers, Faridpur, Calcutta, 1925, p-47

<sup>13</sup> See, Bandopadhyay Sekhar, 1997, pg- 28-29, 58

<sup>14</sup> Malley L.S.S.O, Bengal District Gazetteers, Faridpur, Calcutta, 1925, p-47

<sup>15</sup> Bose Nirmal Kumar, “The Structure of Hindu Society”( translated from Bengali by Andre Beteille), New Delhi, pg-- 159

<sup>16</sup> See, Das NC, 1368BS, pg-36-37

<sup>17</sup> Malley L.S.S.O, Bengal District Gazetteers, Faridpur, Calcutta, 1925, p-47

economic exploitation and deprivation by upper caste. The anger and frustration caused by the disabilities was slowly taking the shape of a social movement. The situation was ripe and a spark was needed. In 1872-73, the Namasudra headman of village Amgram in Bakerganj invited everyone for a sradh ceremony (funeral feast) of his father. Members of the higher caste refused to accept the invitation and dine in the house of a Chandal. The reasons stated by them were the following: the women of this caste visit market places without any sense of shame; people belonging to this caste worked as scavengers for removing filth in jails. A meeting of all Chandal headmen was organised in which the following resolutions were adopted: 1) women must not visit hats (rural markets) and bazaars; 2) no kind of service would be rendered to the other caste; 3) food prepared by all other Hindu caste other than Brahmans was not to be partaken of. They also demanded equal treatment in jails and this was also duly communicated to the government officials visiting the locality<sup>18</sup>.

The Namasudras for the first time attempted to organise a movement. Although it was politically insignificant, nevertheless it represented an endeavour to destabilize the hegemonic ritual order and an implicit effort to rise in social scale among the Hindus. The protest was against a social condition that imposed several disabilities like low status, lack of social honour, no education facilities, poor economic conditions etc. It was decided in the meeting that anybody who refused to support the movement would face social ostracism. The organisers were concerned about the poor financial condition of the Namasudras, so they decided that those who would suffer from the no work programme would get support from their relatives and in case they had no one to support them, the village community would take care of them. This was publicly announced: it was also proclaimed that the government had issued orders for the observation of the above resolutions. The movement spread rapidly over the southern part of Faridpur and north-west Bakerganj and adjoining areas of Jessore<sup>19</sup>The effect of the strike was such that the Magistrate of Faridpur who visited the affected area found “the fields.... untilled, the houses unthatched and not a Chandal in the service of Hindu or Mohammedans, or a Chandal woman in any market. The situation was so unstable in Muksudpur and Gopalganj that extra police had to be mobilised for maintaining peace and order.”<sup>20</sup>But the movement began to break down as the poorer Namasudras found it difficult to sustain without work. They gradually returned to work but had to accept worse terms and their demand that the higher castes should accept food and water from their hands remained unfulfilled.<sup>21</sup>

The failure of the movement in 1872-73 made them realize the vital importance of caste organizations and thus their search for new socio-political movements begun. Several meetings were held in different Namasudra villages, whose main agenda was the upliftment of Namasudras. The Namasudra Hitoishini Samiti was formed at Dacca February 1902 to co-ordinate the movement. With the failure of the Namasudra movement in 1872-73, the leaders realized that there was a need for social organization that could bind the community together and infuse in them a self confidence to fight as a unified group against the hegemonic order. This need was fulfilled by the Matua sect, which emerged and spread among the Namasudras of Faridpur. The sect was organised by Harichand, who was born in a Namasudra/ Chandal family in 1811/12 in a village at Faridpur District.<sup>22</sup> Shree Harichand Thakur aroused a sense of self confidence amongst the long neglected and down trodden large sections of people of south eastern areas of Bengal Province. The Matua sect started by Shree Harichand, repudiated casteism and talked about equality of all men and women.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>District Superintendent of Police to Magistrate of Faridpur, 18 March 1873, Judicial Department, Government of Bengal, March 1873, Prog.No 179, West Bengal National Archive

<sup>19</sup>Magistrate of Faridpur to Commissioner of the Dacca Division, 8 April 1873, , Judicial Department, Government of Bengal, 1873, A May 1873, Prog.No 57, West Bengal National Archive

<sup>20</sup> WS Wells, Magistrate of Faridpur to the Commissioner of Dacca Division, dated 8 April 1873, Judicial Proceedings, 56-60, 17 May 1873.

<sup>21</sup>Officiating Commissioner of the Dacca Division to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Judicial Dept, 14 April 1873, Judicial Dept, Government of Bengal, May 1873, Prog.No.56, West Bengal State Archive.

<sup>22</sup> Haldar, Nityananda (1988): *Matua Dharma Darshan* (in Bengali) (Kolkata: Thakur Nagar), p. 47

<sup>23</sup> Sarkar, Tarak Chandra (1918): *Sree Sree Harileelamrita* (in Bengali) (Kolkata: Thakur Nagar), p. 13 & pp. 59-60

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- [8] see, Bandopadyay Sekhar, 1997, pg12-19
- [9] Risley HH op.cit, Vol 1, pp185-186, vol-2 appendix1, p-34
- [10] ibid, Bandopadyay Sekhar, 1997 , pg- 22-23
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- [15] Census of India, 1911, Vol-V, Part I&II. Raiyat refers to revenue paying peasants
- [16] see Bandopadhyay Sekhar, 1997, pg12-19
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