

## PROTEST MOVEMENT OF A DALIT COMMUNITY – A STUDY OF NAMASUDRA COMMUNITY OF COLONIAL BENGAL

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Namasudras are recognized as the lower caste people of East Bengal. They constituted the largest agrarian caste in Eastern Bengal. They gradually emerged as a well-organized community so as to successfully challenge the hegemony of Hindu ritual order and the domination of high caste gentry in colonial Bengal. In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they organized a powerful movement among the schedule castes communities of Bengal. When schedule caste politics emerged in the province in the 1930s, the Namasudra community provided the same with both powerful leadership and popular support base. But their internal conflict weakened their movement. The alignments, defections, the splitting of leadership among the Namasudra leaders were breaking the internal coherence of the movement. The movement ultimately lost its independent entity that was there till 1937 before the elections. The result of the 1946 election showed a complete breakdown of their independent entity. The partition put the final nail on the coffin.*

**KEYWORDS** *Dalit, Scheduled Castes, Harijan, Brahmanic Hegemony, Namasudra, Christian Missionary, Matua, Harichand, Congress, Swadeshi Movement, Non –Cooperation movement, Quit India movement*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The word "Dalit" comes from the Marathi language which means "ground", "suppressed", "crushed", or "broken to pieces". The term expresses their "weakness, poverty and humiliation at the hands of the upper castes in the Indian society". It was first used by Jyotirao Phule in the nineteenth century in the context of oppression faced by the lower castes.<sup>1</sup> Gandhi used the term "Harijan" which means "Children of God" to refer to people of lower caste/Dalit. Gandhi borrowed the name from a Bhakti Saint of the seventeenth century, Narsingh Mehta<sup>2</sup>. He appealed to caste Hindus to use the term Harijan instead of Antyaja. He explained:

“The 'untouchable', to me is, as compared to us (caste -Hindus); really a 'Harijan'—a man of God—and we are 'Durjana' (men of evil). For whilst the untouchable has toiled and moiled and dirtied his hands so that we may live in comfort and cleanliness, we have delighted in suppressing him. We are solely responsible for all the shortcoming and faults

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Hemantrawatdalit and backward women, lakshay publication ,New Delhi ,2011,pg-1

<sup>2</sup>Shah, Ghanshyam (2001) ed. Dalit Identity and Politics. New Delhi: Sage  
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[www.iaset.us](http://www.iaset.us)

that we may lay at the door of these untouchables. It is still open to us to be Harijan ourselves, but we can only do so by heartily repenting of our sin against them.”<sup>3</sup> (Gandhi, 1971: 244)

The Harijan nomenclature is considered pejorative by some leaders of the castes. They prefer to be called Dalit. Occupying the lowest rank in the Hindu caste system, they are called Avarna, those whose place is outside the chaturvarna system. They are also known as Perial, Panchama, Atisudra, Antyajaor Namasudra in different parts of the country. In the context of traditional Hindu society, Dalit status has often been historically associated with occupation regarded as ritually impure, such as any involving leatherwork, butchering, or removal of dirt, animal carcasses, and wastes. Dalits work as manual laborers cleaning streets, latrines, and sewers. Engaging in these activities was considered to be polluting to the individual and this pollution was considered contagious. As a result, Dalits were commonly segregated, and banned from full participation in Hindu social life, their touch, and sometimes their shadows and even their voices are believed to pollute 'caste-Hindus'<sup>4</sup>. The term "Scheduled Caste" is the official term used in Indian government documents to identify former "untouchables". However, in 2008 the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, noticing that "Dalit" was used interchangeably with the official term "scheduled castes", called the term "unconstitutional" and asked state governments to end its use<sup>5</sup>. The SCs constitute 16 percent of India's total population.

The discriminating social system in India has given rise to several protests and revolts by the oppressed section i.e. the marginalized Dalit. The phenomenon of exploitation, humiliation and multiform deprivations at the hands of upper castes made Dalits to develop a new awakening and consciousness which culminated in various organized as well as unorganized attempt to restructure society, to get rid of Brahmanic hegemony. Therefore the anti-caste movements emerged in various parts of India. Some known Dalit protests are Izhavas and Pulyas in the state of Travancore, Shanars and Nadars in the province of Madras, Adi Dharma movement in Punjab, Satnami Panth in Chhattisgarh, Mahar movement in Maharashtra, and Namasudra movement in Bengal. Within the Dalit discourse, Namasudra movement stand out as a significant narrative in empowering the socially, politically and economically marginalized section of the Indian society.

### **The Namasudra Community and Struggle for Self -Assertion**

The Namasudra, a lower caste community, in colonial Bengal transformed itself from a peripheral multitude into a settled agricultural community in six eastern districts of Bengal. At the outset, the Namasudras were not even a well-organized caste as they were divided into numerous endogamous occupational sub caste having different ranks. Since there were a lot of barriers against social interaction among the Namasudras so they did not form a homogeneous group. But they gradually emerged as a well-organized community so as to successfully challenge the hegemony of Hindu ritual order and the domination of high caste gentry in colonial Bengal.

The Namasudras inhabited the six eastern district of Bengal namely Faridpur, Jessore, Bakerganj, Mymensingh, Dacca, and Khulna. They constituted the largest agrarian population. They were not an organized caste in the beginning and were known as Chandala. They were divided into numerous occupational subcastes with differentiated rank. Namasudras were engaged for the most part in boating and cultivation. The rapid reclamation of swamps and forest land of eastern Bengal changed the status of the Namasudras to a settled agricultural community. A small section of this

<sup>3</sup> Gandhi, M. K (1971) Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi. vol.47, Publications Divisions, Delhi.

<sup>4</sup>Shah Ghanshyam(2004) Social Movements in India. New Delhi: Sage Publication,pg-118

<sup>5</sup>Geetanjali (2011) Status of Dalit in India. New Delhi: Centrum Press pg-1-2

community who became landowners and rich peasants due to the reclamation of land felt that they were not treated by the higher castes as equals. They realized that caste elites were intended to exploit and enslave the lower castes. The social disability, segregation and economic exploitation of Namasudras and their aspiration of achieving higher status in the caste ladder gave birth to a protest movement. The protest began in Faridpur- Bakarganj in 1872. The protest was carried on by Namasudras through a social and economic boycott of higher castes.

The protest was politically insignificant as it only aimed at raising the Namasudras on the social scale. In terms of economic relations, the movement centered around the growing refusal to perform the traditional caste duties. The protest that began in 1872 was their first expression of revolt against the hegemony of the caste system. However, the protest could not alter their social condition. Meanwhile, a Vashnavite religious sect known as Matua was started by a Namasudra Sri Harichand. This sect sought further opportunities for social mobilization and helped in evolving an articulate community consciousness.

The Matua sect brought solidarity and cohesion within the Namasudra community. The Matua sect was open to all castes, religion, and classes. Not only did the Namasudras and other lower castes become followers of this sect, but even some Muslims and Christians also became disciples of Harichand and his son Guruchand. It laid stress on universal brotherhood and wanted to create a compassionate religion which is against ritual formalism, oppression, and caste dogmatism. This sect laid special emphasis on the dignity of labor accompanied by social progress and spiritual upliftment. It insisted that all people were required to work to earn their living, irrespective of their status. Harichand the leader of this sect, emphasized on education as he realized that illiteracy and ignorance were at the root of the degradation of Namasudras. This sect firstly challenged the existing hegemony of the higher caste, secondly, it emphasized the education of the Namasudra masses. Further, it propagated the accumulation of wealth as it would remove poverty and give them an opportunity to get an education which in turn would help them in job opportunities and higher positions in the government services. Fourthly, it stressed on unity among people to remove differences in aims and aspiration. It also provided a new code of conduct to the Namasudras who aimed at acquiring a higher status. This new code of conduct and reformation in the customs was followed in order to get accommodated in the structure of Hindu society. To achieve greater solidarity within the caste system they organized a number of meetings, formed many organizations to coordinate the movement, published magazines, papers etc. Christian missionaries played an important role in educating and uplifting the Namasudras. They set up many schools and colleges, homes for homeless, provided medical facilities etc. This may have influenced the conversion of some Namasudras, although they were not many.

The Namasudras got involve in organizing their community as they realize that to carry on a movement they need a strong organization. Thus many organizations like Bengal Namasudra Association, NamasudraHetaishiSamiti, and many other associations sprang up in different districts of Bengal. Several meetings were organized by these organizations. Many journals like NamasudraSuhrid, Patakaetc were published; the aim was to organize this community. Because of their persistent effort, the earlier derogatory epithet 'Chandal' was removed in the Census Report of 1911. Henceforth they were termed as Namasudras. Through various Namasudra organizations, the Namasudras urged the government to take steps for the eradication of illiteracy and also demanded fellowships and reservations in government jobs. The results of these demands were the 'concessions' that they received from the British government. One should note that such concessions were necessary because existing caste discrimination resulted in social, cultural and economic disabilities of lower castes. one thing that was apparent during this phase was Namasudras faith in British rule and felt that removal of the British

Government would lead to an end of egalitarian governance and the beginning of an oppressive rule of higher castes. This fear made them collaborate with the British. However, the British had something else in their mind: they supported the lower castes in order to divide and weaken the national unity which was posing a big threat to the British government. However, it would be wrong to assume that the Namasudras were fiercely loyal to Britishers.

Their collaboration with the colonial masters in order to ensure some measures of social safety and economic welfare for the lower castes was a tactical move which was necessary because higher castes did not accommodate their interest nor did they work towards their upliftment. It became imperative for the Namasudras to use British power to help break the structure of exploitation and build an egalitarian society where they could live with self-respect and dignity. By 1915 they organized many associations and organizations in many districts of eastern Bengal and also succeeded in acquiring benefits from their Colonial rulers. However, the Montagu Chelmsford Reform in 1918 followed by the Act of 1919 which recognized their special need by providing for inclusion of a Depressed Classes representative among the nominated non-official members of the Bengal legislative council, gave Namasudras an opportunity to become politically organized. They complained to the government about their meager representation in the Councils. The Simon Commission also admitted that adequate representation should be secured for the Depressed Classes. The Round Table Conferences followed by Communal Award, created reserved constituencies for the Depressed Classes and also gave them the additional right to contest seats in the general constituencies. Their long-cherished dream of share in political power was thus going to fulfill. The Namasudra leadership during this phase experienced a lack of unity since some Namasudra leaders joined other political groups some leaders were worked independently. As the leaders were getting drawn towards institutional politics the Namasudra peasantry began to drift away from the leaders because their grievances were not addressed properly. The peasantry began participating in Proja movement organized by FazlulHaq as it was addressing their issues. This lack of cohesiveness among Namasudra leaders and also between the Namasudra peasantry and leaders played an important role in weakening the movement in the long run. The alienation of the Namasudras from mainstream nationalism till 1936 was due to the fact that firstly, Congress was considered by them as a party of higher castes secondly, the Congress did nothing for their development or upliftment remained far from trying to break the existing hegemonic caste order. Thirdly, Congress did not accommodate their aspiration for political power.

The Namasudra movement now took two different directions. On the one hand the elite Namasudras, who acquired education and wealth, now aspired to political power. On the other hand, the poor Namasudra peasants were fighting against the high caste jotedars, social disabilities, poverty, illiteracy, and economic exploitation. The Namasudra elites, who were more involved in institutional politics, neglected the peasantry in the process.

The Namasudras aspiration to acquire the position of power made them send several memorials and petitions to the British government in which they stated that they wanted privileges similar to that of the Muslims, Actually, they had no option except to support the British who were offering them facilities and opportunities, although in a slow and gradual process. The British did nothing to transform the exploitative caste system or to alleviate the worst aspects of untouchability. Their aspiration for power or share in power could be seen not only as the negation of the extreme subjugation of lower castes but also as the basis for achieving any other kind of gain.

The Namasudras maintained a distance from the nationalist agitation from the Swadeshi movement, Home Rule, Non-cooperation movement, Civil Disobedience and Quit India movement. Gandhi and many other nationalist leaders made several attempts to get the support of this community, which constituted the largest population of eastern Bengal.

The nationalist leadership failed to organize an alternative organization in which Namasudras and other lower castes could find a respectable place. The Namasudra demand for a share in power was expressed in their demand for special and separate representation. This was accompanied by a strong distrust in the higher caste gentry since it was believed that the profound impact of caste would not let the higher castes speak of the interests of Namasudras. The Act of 1935 provided them a reservation of seats in the legislature.

With the elections of 1937, the Namasudras emerged as a powerful political bloc which other political groups could no longer afford to ignore. They felt the need for accommodating the political ambitions of the Namasudra leaders and tried to win over them. However, there was nothing in the agenda of the nationalist that could incline the Namasudras to the Congress and make them participate in the nationalist movement. New political alignments began to take place during this phase. The joining of coalition ministry of FazlulHuq by Namasudra leaders, then in 1938 forming close ties with the Congress showed their continuous shift in strategies as well as their changing relationship with the political group. This shifts show their integrative tendency and at the same time absence of caste politics (previously the Namasudras kept away from Congress because it was dominated by higher caste). Perhaps their hunger for more political power was making them form alliances with other groups and compelling them to concentrate on institutional politics. This also led to their alienation from the Namasudra peasantry.

The Namasudras peasantry had their own grievances. They remained aloof from the Congress and national movement. This alienation from the national movement (the Congress) was not just the result of the self-interests of a few leaders but also the result of a lack of initiatives on the part of the Congress leadership to heal aggrieved feelings and build up confidence and unity among the lower castes. However, from 1940s majority of Namasudra leaders began to integrate into the dominant political structure in the country. The educated Namasudra elite though maintained a distance from Congress for long but their aspiration of leadership was accommodated by Congress making them closer to the former. The 1940- 47 Namasudras movement saw many changes- there was integration, division, and co-option. The Namasudra leaders formed many alliances to have their share in political power and because of indulgence of leaders in institutional politics they were constantly getting away from the peasantry thus creating again a division in the movement. The Namasudra leaders alignment with Congress, Muslim league, Ambedkar's' Dalit politics reflected that the Namasudra community was not concerned about religious, community, not even the caste, their concern was different and diverted but not opposite. Diverted in the sense that at one hand the Namasudra elites were struggling to get their political share, on the other hand, the peasants were fighting for their economic rights thus two forces were acting inside the Namasudra movement. The alignments, defections, the splitting of leadership among the Namasudra leaders were breaking the internal coherence of the movement. The movement ultimately lost its independent entity that was there till 1937 before the elections. The result of the 1946 election showed a complete breakdown of their independent entity. The partition put the final nail on the coffin. With the partition there was the division of Namasudra community, some preferred to stay in East Bengal and some got settled in West Bengal thus leading to complete disappearance of the movement.

On the other hand, the relationship of Namasudras with the Muslims saw many ups and downs. There were frequent riots and violence between them. The two communities fought for the protection and the upholding of the honor of their respective communities. But this also went together with instances of cooperation and coordination also, when both the communities came together and fought against the upper caste Hindu and Muslim zamindars. They were both conscious of their newly acquired status and wanted to protect it and paradoxically their assertion of rights and desire for

self-respected to many fights – as well as acts of co-operation - among themselves. One thing that was common to both Namasudras and Muslims was their identical aim to achieve self respect and to stop their economic exploitation. Together they organized a movement against high rents and also for two- third share of produce for sharecroppers.

The Communists found here an opportunity to organize the peasant movement. Thus their participation in various movements at different stages, their collaboration with Muslims, showed that caste identity did not always determine their action. For them, there was no firm and non-negotiable boundary or community territory. Their actions showed that they were more involved in resolving peasant issues which were affecting their lives. Their outlook was constantly changing, and at many points, they kept their religious and caste identity aside to wage a joint fight for their rights.

Matua sect played an important role in organizing Namasudra, facilitating interaction and articulation of a collective identity but suffered a great loss due to partition. On the eve of partition, Matuas did not compromise with their distinctive as a follower of Harichand and Guruchand and remained loyal to P.R. Thakur. After partition again it was revived by P.R. Thakur. In course of time, it began to play an important role in the political sphere.

After partition, P.R. Thakur came to West Bengal and settled in a small village about 63 kilometers from Calcutta, which later came to be known as Thakurnagar. In order to materialize the dreams of his ancestors, he tried to revive the MatuaMahasangha since 1949, the organization founded by his grandfather Guruchand Thakur. Though initially, he supported the Congress scheme of refugee resettlement, later on, after a rift with his party, he entirely engaged himself in the task of rehabilitation of the Namasudra refugees and reviving the organization. Thakurnagar eventually came up as the first Namasudra refugee colony in West Bengal encircling which more than 50,000 Namasudras settled down within a span of ten years. Finally, it is in 1986 that the MatuaMahasangha regained its full life and in 1988, the organization got registered.<sup>6</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The Namasudras in order to find a respectful position in the society carried on their movement against the Brahmanic hegemony and the resultant backwardness of their community. They first organized themselves and then fought to get educated. Then they participated in the election and proved their might. Their constant struggle for a respectful position earned them respect. Their alienation with Congress ended. Their unity was their strength. But splitting in leadership, alliances etc proved fatal to the internal cohesiveness of the movement which resulted in the weakening of the movement. Finally, the partition gave a death blow to the movement.

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