



# Caste And Identity: The Namasudras Of Bengal 1872 - 1947

Author : Krishna Debnath

Designation : Alumnus of Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University

Department : Department of History

**Abstract:** The Namasudra are the second largest populated sub-caste among the Scheduled Caste Community in West Bengal. Originally Namasudra Community lived in the eastern part of the undivided Bengal. They are most numerous in the Decca and Presidency divisions, particularly in the districts of Bakharganj, Faridpur, Jessore, and Khulna, Decca, Maymensingh, which contained in 1901, 75.08 percent of this caste group of 1,852,371. The introduction of various new facilities to the specific class, caste group, communities by the colonial government inspired them to launch socio-religious movement which took the shape of caste consolidation movement during the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. In this movement there was a significant role of Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur and Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur for the overall development of the depressed and downtrodden people in the society specially for the upliftment of the Namasudras.

**Keywords:** Namasudra, Chandal, Identity, Discrimination, Protest, Hari Chand, Matua, Upliftment.

**Introduction:** The social awakening, religious and political movements among the lower caste people in Colonial Bengal and many other parts of Colonial India may be interpreted in terms of two different distinct manners. The underlying reason behind these movement was perhaps due to the utter negligence of the downtrodden on account of their economic set back, social disparity, lack of proper education and inhuman treatment meted out to them by the upper class people of the society. Their movement was aimed at attaining equal status like that of the higher caste elites of the society. But keeping in view their social status, at that time in the society, as also to get rid of endless inhuman treatment given to them from various angle, they shifted their focus of movement to acquire 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 which emerged as Matua Movement in Colonial Bengal. But after independence (1947) Bengal has divided into two parts East Pakistan, now it is Bangladesh and West Bengal. Most of the Namasudras were became a part of Bangladesh. Many of them have migrated from Bangladesh by force or wish. Now they scatter mostly in West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Andaman – Nicobar Island, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh in India.

The main aims of the movement by the Namasudras are:

- (i) Recognition of Identity (Transformation from Chandals to Namasudras).
- (ii) Expansion of Education and Employment.
- (iii) Social upliftment.
- (iv) To growth economic stability.
- (v) Political Empowerment.
- (vi) Movement for social equality.
- (vii) Development of Matua Community.

The Identity of the Namasudra Community is a historical phenomenon and not a given or natural thing. Every community has their special identity and ethnographic history, which helps other to have clear understanding and to take necessary step for the development of that particular community. In an attempt to establish the historical origin and emergence of the Namasudra Communities of Bengal, it is important to probe the origin of the term Namasudra.

The origin of the word 'Namasudra', which is not mentioned in only of the pre- nineteenth century medieval Bengal literature is extremely uncertain. Colonial ethnologist like James Wise, and H.H. Risley believed that the word 'Namasudra' was derived either from the Sanskrit word 'Namas' or 'Adoration' or the Bengal word 'Namate' i.e, below or underneath. In the first case it would mean those who were bound to show obeisance even to the sudras. In the second case, the word would perhaps mean a Lower grade or sudras, a status the chandalas of Manu God gained promotion but these two explanation appear to be highly improbable in view of the new sense of self-respect associated with the Namasudra Identity.

According to H.H. Risley, the Namasudras derived from chandals, chanrals, chang, a non-Aryan caste of eastern Bengal engaged for the most part in boating and cultivation. The derivation of the name chandal is uncertain, and it is a plausible conjecture that it may have been, like sudra, the tribal name of one of the aboriginal races whom the Aryan found in possession of the soil. Dr. James Wise said 'Chang or Changa signifies handsome in Sanskrit and was most likely used in irony by the early Hindus. According to Monu, the Chandals recognized as a lower grade of sudras. Manu brands them as "the Lowest of mankind", sprung from the illicit Intercourse of a sudra man with a Brahman women, whose touch defiles the purr and who have no ancestral rites.

The Namasudras of Bengal are not an occupational caste. They are found in various 'humble' occupations as cultivators, fisherman, boatman, carpenters, etc. They are regarded as "untouchables" by the higher castes of Bengal, and only a generation ago were known by the name of 'Chandala'. No doubt they are a somewhat backward community with a rather low level of culture, who can't point to any intellectual eminence or historical distinction among their forefathers in the immediate or distant past. Even the liberal-minded Abul Fazal speaks of the Chandals of the sixteenth century as "Vile wretches who eat carrion." At the present day the term chandal is throughout India used only in abuse, and is not acknowledged by any race or caste as its peculiar designation. The Chandals of Bengal invariably call themselves Nama-sudra, and with characteristic jealousy the higher divisions of the caste apply the name chandal to the lower, who in their turn pass it on to the Dom.

Though the word sudra was often loosely used by ancient writers to denotes all those who did not belong to the three higher varnas, there was always a distinction between those who had come or were coming under Aryan influence, the sudras proper, and those sometimes called the fifth Varna, who were too savage and unclean to be amenable to Aryan culture and practices the Nishadas, Chandalas, Pukkadas, etc. of the Dharmashastras. According to the Brahmanical texts, the Brahmins are at top of the caste hierarchy and the Chandals are at the bottom. In common parlance, even today, the term Chandal is often used to denote the antonym of 'Brahmin'. The Chandals (Namasudras) have been despised by the upper caste Hindus from time immemorial, and even treading on the shadow caste by a Chandal has been considered an act of pollution.

The Chandal origin of the Namasudra Community also explains it's social status among the Hindu of Bengal. The Chandals are untouchables according to 'Manusmriti' and "Vyasasamhita". But the 'Brahmavaivarta puranam' and the 'Brihadharma puranam', the two thirteenth-fourteenth century texts, refer to these Chandals as 'antyja' or a low born mixed caste or sankarajati, and do not give any firm indication that they were strictly held to be untouchables. The literary evidence of the Managala Kavyas of the sixteenth -

eighteenth centuries also suggest that the Chandals lived within the precincts of the town and were not regarded as 'antebas' (dwellers on the periphery) as indicated by Manu.

The legends of the Chandals give no clue to their early history, and appear to have been invented in recent times with the object of glorifying the caste and establishing its claim to a recognised position in the Hindu system. Thus, according to a tradition of the Dacca Chandals, they were formerly Brahmans, who became degraded by eating with Sudras, while others assert that in days of yore they were the domestic servants of Brahmans, for which reason they have perpetuated many of the religious observances of their masters. For instance, the Chandals celebrates the sraddha on the eleventh day as Brahmans do, and the Gayawal priests conduct the obsequial ceremonies of the Bengali Chandals without any compunction. Another story gives them for ancestor Bamdeb, son of the Brahman Vasishtha, who was degraded by his father and turned into a Chandal as punishment for a ceremonial mistake committed by him when granting absolution to Dasarath, King of Oudh, for killing a Brahman by misadventure while hunting. The Dacca Chandals retain an obscure tradition of having originally migrated from Gaya, and make mention of a certain Govardhan Chandals as an ancestor of theirs. Dr. Buchanan considered the Chandal of Bengal to be identical with the Dosadh of Bihar. Although both are equally low in the scale of caste, and characterized by an unusual amount of independence and self-reliance, very great differences actually exist. The Dosadh worships deified heroes belonging to hirelianc, the Chandal never does. The Dosadh invokes Rahu and Ketu, the former being his tutelary deity, while we find no such divinity revered by the Chandal. Finally, the Sraddha of the Dosadh is celebrated on the thirtieth day as with the Sudras, that of the Chandal on the eleventh as with Brahmans.

Although subdivided according to trades Chandals actually work at anything. They are the only Hindus employed in the boats (Bajra) hired by Europeans, they form a large proportion of the peasantry, and they are shopkeepers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, oilmen, as well as successful traders. They are, however, debarred from becoming fishermen, although fishing for domestic use is sanctioned. In the census returns of 1872, the Chandals, correctly included among the semi - Hinduized aborigines, are met with in every district of Bengal, forming, however, a very small fraction of the population in the most northern, western, and south eastern divisions. They are chiefly congregated in the districts of Baqirganj (3,26,755); Jessore (2,71,325); Dacca (1,91,162); Farridpur (1,56,223); Mymensingh (1,23,262); and Silhet (1,22,457), forming a total of 11,91,184 persons, or 73 per cent of the whole Chandal race in Bengal, which comprises 16,20,545 individuals.

The social degradation of the Namasudras helped them to be united against the upper caste outrage which helped them to develop a defiant attitude against the social disabilities. It must be added that their agrarian discontent manifested itself in the form of peasant resistance against Zamindary oppression. While the struggle between the Hindu landlords and Muslim peasant was perceived in religious terms, the Namasudras linked their struggle against higher caste Zamindars with movements for caste upliftment. In the district of Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Khulna, Jassore the Namasudras were over – whelmingly employed as bargadars or agricultural laborers. This is to say that they were at the bottom of both economic and social hierarchies. The Namasudra leaders succeeded in channelizing the agrarian discontent into a broader mass movement for their social upliftment. Although The educated part of the Namasudras gradually moved away from the mainstream of the national movement for the socio-economic development of their community.

The living conditions of these untouchables were shameful. They had no land to till nor could they follow any profession. They did menial work ordered by the higher castes, from the village, and had to accept leftovers from the higher caste people, in return for their endless toil. Their physical contact was said to have same effect. Hindu religious texts forbade them to wear good clothes or ornaments or even footwear, and prescribed severe and humiliating punishment for violating these orders. Even for a basic necessity like water they were helplessly dependent on the higher castes, good will. The most perverted practice of untouchability was that which at one time compelled the untouchables to tie an earthen pot around their necks so that their sputum should not fall to the earth and pollute it. Another was the compulsion to tie a broom behind them so that their footprints would be erased before others set their eyes on them. Thus the untouchables lived a life full of poverty, starvation, ignorance, insults, injustice, atrocities – practices totally against humanity. The only thing available to them in plenty was their wretchedness and this was so mingled with every drop of their blood that they forgot their own existence and could hardly dream of freedom or independence. This condition prevailed till the British came to India.

The British when took over the administration in their own hand, at that time most of the people were engaged in government service from higher caste Hindu community. Consequent upon this, a large section of illiterate people were deprived of having any administrative power, remained as a neglected sector for a long period of time due to indifferent attitude and selfish motives of a group of the then intellectual opportunists belong to higher castes, specially brahmans. For the first time Census started in India, during 1872. The Census authority at that time was in the hand of Brahmans of Kanauj. Intentionally, the Census authority instead of writing Namasudra community they mentioned this section of people as Chandal. These Chandals were subsequently styled as Charal. However, this section of people had not accepted this nomenclature at all. They, time and again, protested in this regard to the administrative authority to change their designation from chandal / charhal to Namasudra but due to weak social structure and illiteracy and lack of proper unity, they could not succeed.

After the reign of Sen King, Muslim rule started in India. During this period inhuman oppressions were started by higher caste Hindus to lower caste Namasudra community in such a way that finding no other remedial alternative they, in mass scale, adopted Islam as their religion. This is also worth mentioning that during the rule of either Muslim or Christian administrator they attempted their level best to bring people of different religion under the umbrella of their respective religion adopting various artifices. One of the most advantages at that time was that even if the most neglected people banished from the society like destitutes, untouchables, sweepers, scavengers and even as the lower caste or tribes etc., if adopt either Muslim or Christian religion, all of their social and administrative problems would mitigate, humiliation removed and used to get equal status in the society. As a result of freedom from physical assaults, inhuman tortures and grant of relief like providing equal status in the society, a major portion of Hindu being lured with such facilities adopted Islam religion.

Their first organised endeavour at self - affirmation started in Faridpur – Bakarganj region in late 1872, when in official documents they were still being referred to as Chandalas. The movement had no political significance at that time and was only an effort made by them to raise themselves in social scale among the Hindus. The immediate occasion was the sradh or funeral ceremony of the father of a well to do Chandala headman of village Amgram in Bakarganj. Disregarding the established norms of commensality, he invited his higher caste neighbours to attend the ceremony and dine in his house. The latter, at the instigation of the Kayasthas, refused to accept the invitation and the reasons cited were many. The women of this caste visited the market places without any sense of shame and their degraded status was even acknowledged by the government, as in the jails only the Chandala inmates were employed as scavengers for removing filth. A meeting of all the Chandala headmen was therefore organised immediately and the following resolutions were adopted: (1) women must not in future visit hats (periodic rural marts) and bazaars; (2) service of no kind whatever be taken with the other castes; and (3) food prepared by all other Hindu castes, other than Brahmans, was not to be partaken of.

However, the movement spread rapidly over a wide region comprising the swamp country south of Faridpur and north – west Bakarganj, as well as the adjoining areas of Jessore. The epicentre gradually 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 the course of his tour of the affected areas, found ‘the fields... untilled, the houses unthatched, and not a Chandal in the service of Hindu or Mahamedan, 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 headquarters for maintaining peace and order. But during this time the movement was also showing signs of weakness, as the poorer Chandalas found it difficult to sustain it any longer.

When the people of Namasudra Community in Bangladesh were extremely depressed from all corners, and the oppression reached its pinnacle and became extremely intolerable, at that time Sri Sri Harichand Thakur was born in the house of Yaswanta Thakur of Safaldanga village in the district of Faridpur (now in Bangladesh) on the auspicious day of Madhukrishna Troyodoshi Tithi in 1812 A.D. He and his family had been Vaishnavites for generations. His grandfather Mochanram was a devout Vaishnava and was known in his locality as Thakur Mochairam. Machanram’s eldest son Jasomanta was a Vaishnava devotee as well, and he too inherited the title of ‘Thakur’ and it was from his time that the family abandoned its original surname Biswas. His son Harichand was evicted from his ancestral village through the machinations of the zamindar and had to settle ultimately in village Orakandi, where he took to cultivation and small trade for a living. From

the very beginning of his life, he could win the respect and honor of the downtrodden men by his divinely miracles and many people became his disciples. He united the under developed and the downtrodden people. Apart from these, many people used to come to him with their problems, sufferings and diseases. In this regard there is a reference to it in “Sri Sri Hari Lilamrita”:

*Prabhur mukher bakye Roge mukta hai,  
Eai mato Rogi kata ase ar Jay.  
Panch-Sat grame krome Sabha holo bhari,  
Kato Lok ashibe dekhite bole Hari.*

[We are healed by the word of the Lord. This is how many patients come and go. People from many villages used to come to see Hari arranging many meetings]

In this case, the Namasudras began to believe that Harichand was gifted with supernatural power, not only to cure a disease, to give life to the dead or to tame a tiger, but to punish the social offenders as well: he could destroy the zamindari of an oppressive Brahman landlord or curse a cruel naib (a landlord’s agent) with leprosy. The development of the sect thus tended to subvert the hegemonic order and therefore its upholders also tried to deter them, at first by means of physical coercion (with the help of the local zamindar) and then by resorting to social boycott. Yet another tactic of the opponents was to ridicule them as moto or people drunk with their own spiritual outpourings (matoyara). But as in this way the upper caste Hindus, and also the respectable Vaishnavas, distanced themselves from the followers of the sect, the latter developed a greater sense of solidarity. In order to vindicate the irreverent image of his sect, Harichand turned the ridiculous epithet (‘moto’) into a symbol of protest; he called his sect ‘Matua’, a word that could not be found in the elites lexicon. The word Matua was first introduced by Sri Harichand Thakur and his followers were styled as Matua. It is worth mentioning here that by mistake many people may think that Namasudra elites organize the community through a vaishnava religious sect known as Matua is not correct “Hereafter the Namasudra elites began to organize the community through a vaishnava religion sect known as Matua”. Matua sect is not a branch of Vaishnava religion rather it is a religion that rouse the consciousness and self confidence among the lower castes and worked for their upliftment.

Though claims were put forth that it was a ‘new’ religion, the philosophical notions of the Matua sect, its general view of life and society and its concepts of cosmology were all constructed through a selective absorption or inversion of ideas and symbols taken from traditional Hinduism and the Bhakti tradition, incorporating both the canonical and Sahajiya variants of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. But the sect would not have been so popular had it not posed a challenge to the hegemonic ritual order and sought to negate its ideology of hierarchy. Harichand was portrayed as the person who had destroyed the pride of the Kshatriya and Brought the Brahman and the Chandala together on a platform of equality.

Desperate people suffering from the inferiority complex used to come to him from every corner of the country. He encouraged them giving the inspirations. Gradually the depressed and downtrodden people could assemble themselves under the religious banner of the ‘Matua Religion’. In such a way, a new and unique religious sect was instituted with the common people of India who were inferior in the sight of the so called upper castes. Although outside of its adequate religiosity the emphasis of this movement was largely secular. Its primary goal was to (i) establish ways and means of achieving perfect peace of mind within the parameters of family life and (ii) eradicate social inequality and ensure the upliftment of the downtrodden. He explained that chanting ‘Harinamgan’ or ‘Namasankirtan’ would make it possible to purify the soul and attain the God. Gradually all the untouchables and lower castes of the society became believers in this religion and this religious sect grew in size. People began to consider him as a gift of nature with supernatural power not only to cure human diseases, but also to protect them from the Brahmanical cruel rules and regulations in the society. “Namasankirtan” among the participants evokes a sense of cooperation and courage, self – respect and confidence which is the strength to stand in front of their strong opponents who throw them in frustration in the society.

Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur’s main aim was to unite the untouchables and the oppressed for a common cause of collective thought, and that is where the key to the liberation of spirituality lies. He wanted to establish a classless; casteless society. According to the recent version, Matua is a socioeconomic religion based on the development of the lower castes on the basis of spirituality and for their liberation through the elimination of caste and untouchability, socioeconomic inequalities from the society. Tarak Chandra Sarkar in his ‘Sri Sri Hari Lilamrita’ expressed that Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur appeared on this earth to rectify the errors of flows.

He overcome all religious barriers and appeared in the house of Jashobanta Thakur to fulfil his task and to popularize 'Harinam' mingled with humanly duties. He relieve the tension and turmoil's of the roofless millions in the last part of 'kaliyug'. His main purpose was to base religion on the pillars of reason, logic and scientific thoughts and to start a mass liberation movement.

Harichand died in 1878, but the sect expanded further under his son Guruchand Thakur, born in 1846. The latter formalised and doctrines of the sect to suit better the needs of an emerging lower caste peasant community. His son Guruchand also visualised a society where there would be no differentiation among human beings particularly among the members of the Matua sect there was to be no division of caste. One of the great social reformers of outstanding skill, Sri Sri Guru Guru Chand Thakur, son of Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur brought about a renaissance among the downtrodden. His birth on the day of Dol Purnima in 1847 (1253 B.S.) is a historic event for the unprivileged classes. He widely promoted the Matua movement in the socio-cultural, intellectual and political fields. Although Guru Chand was born in a Namasudra family. He believed that he could not save his community unless he worked for all other social groups, especially for the depressed and untouchables. He also said that, "All human beings living this world will be considered by me as belonging to one". Guruchand believed that though born in a Namasudra family, he would not be able to salvage his own community unless he worked for the salvation of all other social groups, the depressed and the untouchables in particular. This gradually developed into a universalist approach, which indicates his awareness of the outer world and of the new humanism popularised by the Bengal Renaissance.

The social awakening movement under the leadership of Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur deals with the unification of 'Dharma' and 'Karma'. There can be no equality until and unless the gap between developed and under developed countries has been destroyed. Being a farsighted man, Guru Chand Thakur realized that in order to be socially developed, the Namasudras must have adopted education. This is education which brings wealth and without wealth no caste can move up social scale.

Being a foresighted Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur knew that the present age had to be apprehended to tear the servile bond of decades. For this he instructed his disciples to set up many educational institutions. He gave them financial support. He taught every depressed person to overcome superstition, blind faith and ignorance. But he gave the highest priority to education and enlightenment with the great performance of the British administration in Bengal.

In 1880, Guru Chand Thakur set up Pathsalas in his village Orakandi and various other districts in Bengal with the help of Australian clergymen, Dr. C.S. Mead for the spread of education among the under developed masses according to the the wishes of his father. Guru Chand Tagore realized that if the oppressed could be educated, even the women also, could raise a reasonable voice against social injustice and inequality and engage themselves in various avenues of economic development, become an integral part of the state system. For the spreading of women education, he established 'Shanti Satyabhama Valika Vidyalaya', 'Taltala Gadadhar Valika Vidyalaya' and 'Nari Training School' and a 'Ashram' for widows with the help of Dr. C.S. Mead's wife.

But such demands for special privileges, in an age dominated by the politics of numbers, could only be made effective through mass mobilisation. Hence, the upwardly mobile leadership of the Namasudra community, by using their caste and religious linkages and by speaking against the high caste zamindari oppression in the countryside, also tried to mobilise the peasantry. To achieve greater solidarity within the caste, a number of meetings to discuss various social questions were held from 1881 onwards in different Namasudra villages. The first of these 'uplift meetings', as these were popularly known, was held in 1881 in the house of Iswar Gayen, a Namasudra zamindar of village Dattadanga in the Mollarhat police station 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 henceforth be held regularly. Apart from such meetings, itinerant preachers began to visit Namasudra villages disseminating the message of their social movement among the peasantry. As dramatical forms of expression were expected to have greater imprint on the popular mind, the notions of their high ritual status and myths surrounding it formed the subjects of regular jatra performances (a form of folk theatre) staged by the 'Namasudra Natyasamaj', a theatrical group constituted for this specific purpose. But along with such informal, and rather impromptu methods, more formal conferences were also held periodically to mobilise mass opinion. In their

Jessore conference in 1908, it was resolved that this Namasudra conference would be made a regular feature of their community life and annual meetings would be organised 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, with a district committee supervising the work of all such local bodies in a district. To raise a permanent Namasudra fund, all such committees at various levels were to be authorised to collect subscriptions. A handful of rice, or mushti, had to be set aside before meals in every family household and collected weekly by the village committees. Every member of the village committee was supposed to pay a monthly subscription of one anna, those of the union committees two annas and of the district committees four annas. Three per cent of the expenses incurred in sradh, marriage and other social ceremonies in every Namasudra family had to be donated to this fund and apart from this, measures were also advocated for social reform. It was resolved that any Namasudra marrying his son under 20 years or daughter under 10 years would be excommunicated.

But it was really the Matua sect which offered an organisation for the social movement of the Namasudra community that had already developed fissures and divergent tendencies. Not only did Guruchand's teachings motivate the community to become more self-assertive, but he himself, with his influence as a charismatic religious preceptor, became the leader of their social movement, and Orakandi, his ancestral village, became its headquarters. One of his dispensations, 'jar dal nei tar bal nei', i.e., 'those who do not form a group do not have power', conveyed the message of organising for collective action. It was around this sect that the initial mobilisation of the Namasudras took place, as the original disciples of Guruchand, known as the 'sixty-four mohantas', preached the ideas of Hari - Guruchand and gathered around them thousands of devotees from the Namasudra population of Faridpur, Bakarganj, Dacca, Khulna, Jessore and Tippera districts. Their most popular religious festival was Baruni mela, held to celebrate the birth anniversary of Harichand on the last day of the Bengali month Chaitra (in April). At different places, the most important of them being Orakandi and Lakshmikhali, the mela (fair) attracted thousands of devotees across the local boundaries, The occasion thus offered an excellent opportunity for social mobilisation and communication of the message of social movement in an informal and less organised way.

The leaders of the Namasudra community now began to use this religious platform in a more systematic way for organising a social movement against their degraded condition. To bring the sect under a centralised organisational framework, a Matua Mahasangha was started some time before 1915, through the initiative of one of those early disciples, Tarak Gosain. P. R. Thakur, Guruchand's grandson, after his return from England, thought of reactivating this social organisation and convened at Orakandi a general conference of the Matua devotees in 1931. The following year, the endeavour of Gopal Sadhu gave the Sangha the organisational shape of a 'mission', with an ashram started at Khulna district town on a plot of hundred bigha of land, where Namasudra students, coming from poor peasant families, could stay and continue their studies. Through this organisational network, gradually developed in the early twentieth century, the upper echelon of the community could effectively reach the grassroots level, already stirred up by a new sense of self-respect, and communicate their message of a social and eventually political movement. The other community organisations of a more political nature, such as the Namasudra Hitaishini Samiti, started in Dacca in February 1902, under the Presidency of Raghunath Sarkar and the All Bengal Namasudra Association, started in 1912 under the chairmanship of Mukunda Bihari Mallick. By 1928, it had a strong network in 22 districts of Bengal through its branches. There was a committee in each village, a union with fifteen village committees, and a swamp committee with union shots. To raise funds, he would remove a handful of rice before cooking every day and submit it to the village committee in the month. The money earned from that was spent on village road development, construction of schools, the marriage of poor man's daughter, etc. In the interest of social development, Guruchand Thakur formed 'Namasudra Kalyan Samiti' out of a sense of responsibility. The existence of associations in almost every Namasudra village in Faridpur, Decca, Khulna, Bakharganj was well received with meetings. The program was multifaceted. It is noteworthy that the collective protest against the injustice done to the Namasudras is to resolve the mutual dispute through arbitration before going to court. Another sign of 'Atmasakti' was that when they harvested paddy every year, they formed a 'Namasudra Welfare Fund' by depositing one ounce or forty ounces of paddy. Poverty, famine, deprivation, this association was by their side. With the money deposited, harmoniums, saimanas, hanchaks, joydankas, large-sized pots and pans, etc. were bought for naming in kavigan or for wedding ceremonies. In the case of 'Namasudra Gram Kalyan Samiti' (NGKS), the dual goal of social cohesion and economic development was met, Matua Mahasangha, founded in 1932, and NGKS worked together. On the one hand, social development, where they did not get any help from the mainstream rural upper castes regarding the program. As a result,

the association made them self-reliant. And the expectation of gaining united strength and respect was born from the neglect of the upper castes. On the other hand, Namasangkritann, Kavigan, Harisava, Hariyatra, etc. were the catalysts of their cultural excellence. The historical tradition of forming the Namasudras Development Association did not follow the path of 'Sanskritization' theory of blindness of all the upper castes in India to rise above the lower castes of other states was an attempt to elevate the family, the village and the society into a prose land of equality and justice.

In 1918, when the Namasudra leadership launched a Dalhousie campaign demanding their development and representation in the legislature, nationalists hated Namasudra, as a bunch of idiots who were trying to jump all the top of the tree'. They did not forget this insult and hated from the upper castes nationalists political leaders. But instead of going into the direct protest, withdrawn their political support and moved silently from the Congress side. As a result, due to the lack of support from the lower castes Namasudra, Rajbanshi and Paundra, Congress had to move from the balcony the political power to form a government in Bengal. Even before the Poona Pact (1932), at the Khulna Namasudra Conference in 1930, Guruchand Thakur demanded lower caste representation in education, employment and representation in legislation for backward castes. He said that 'emancipation of the lower castes and untouchables would be never accomplished unless and until they had a share of the political power'. There was no recentness in this demand, there was a demand for the formation and development of the lower castes in protest of caste domination. Because before this, in the Tenancy Act of 1926 and the Primary Education Bill of 1929-30, all the upper caste representatives of the Legislative Assembly took the side of the zamindars. Due to the conservatism of the upper caste, the lower caste people of Bengal could not enter the mainstream politics, they were forced to move in a different direction. As a result, in the elections of 1938 and later in the formation of the government of Bengal, the Congress was forced to withdraw from the sphere of power. On the eve of the partition (1947 election), a large section of Namasudras supported the Congress, but knowing that the partition of Bengal would bring extreme horror to the future destiny of the nation, the Bengali entity was strangled to death in the interest of the Bhadrakal Hindus (gentleman). Immediately the strong united movement of the Namasudras came to an end. Matua leader P.R. Thakur despite being in the Congress continued to oppose the partition of Bengal and submitted a deputation to the boundary commission, but after Noakhali and Kumilla riots changed his views and began to support the Bengal partition. Finally, when the Independence in 1947 along with the partition of Bengal. It destroyed the strong unity and strength of the Namasudra caste movement. All the Distracts where the Namasudras predominated went to East Pakistan, despite all the protestation of Namasudras. But during the decade of colonial period in Bengal politics caste identity and caste mobilizations got crucial protagonist placed 'hyper-visibility of caste'. Namasudra leaders, Virat Mandal, Bhismadev Das, Rashiklal Biswas, Jogendranath Mandal, Mukunda Bihari Mallick and P. R. Thakur were elected in 1936 and 1946 only by the organizational strength of the Namasudras. After partition, they had to be separated from each other. Some were in East Bengal, some in impeccable camps, some in Andaman-Dandakaranya. Although it is too late for the united organization to return to power, it is understood that the new generation has not forgotten the toxic past, even though it is too late for the united organization to return to power. If we listen to the speeches of the leaders of 'AIMBP', Mukul Bairagya, folk poet Asim Sarkar, Virat Bairagya, Nakul Mallick and Manoranjan Basu. Since 2012, the Development Council has quietly convened more than 200 meetings across Bengal. The Panchayat Block has given more than forty deputations to the Zila Parishad on the demand for the development of Namasudras and civil rights. Navanna has campaigned at the demand of the Development Board. One lakh and forty thousand memberships have been created and funds have been formed all over Bengal. It does not seem to be easy to ignore the power of this organized network and majority.

**Conclusion:** The majority and organizational unity of a larger population can be the bird's eye view of all political parties. But, the lower caste communities of Bengal have a caste – based tradition and history of strengthening their internal fabric which is the core consolidation of the Namasudras and Matua community. As a result, ineffective boastful assurances given by all political parties, do not seem to be able to attract the Matua – Namasudras or create divisions among them. The history of the Namasudras moving away from the support of the Left Party proves that historical fact. Since the 1930s, Guruchand Thakur has been preaching at the Matua – Namasudra Conference, calling for 'special privileges' for the lower castes. After the Poona Pact, by 1935, the British government was forced to provide 15 percent reservation for them in education and employment in the lower caste districts of Bengal, despite opposition from a large section of the upper caste. The acquisition of caste – based political entity by the Matua and Namasudras, the protest against socio-economic injustice, and the demand for their representation cannot be communalism, these are their political strategies. May be called a kind of protest against the existing social injustice'. Moreover, at the same time

under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur, the Namasudra movement overcame communalism, so he was able to say, that 'Even though I am a Namasudra, those who are poor, helpless, unwealthy and uneducated, are all my people'.

## REFERENCES

1. Bandhopadhaya, Sekhar. Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India, The Namasudra of Bengal, 1872-1947, Curzon Press, London, 1997.
2. H.H. Risley, "The Tribe and Caste of Bengal", Printed at the Bengal Secretariat Press, vol.1, 1891(reprint 1981), Calcutta.
3. Census of India, 1931, vol.v, "Bengal and Sikkim", Calcutta.
4. W.W. Hunter. A statistical Account of Bengal, vol.v, (London: Trubner & Co., 1875).
5. Bandhopadhaya, Sekhar. "Social Mobility in Colonial Bengal: The Namasudras" edited by Dube – Banerjee, Ishita. Oxford University Press, 2008.
6. Wise, James. "Notes On The Races, Castes And Trades Of Eastern Bengal", Routledge, London, 2017.
7. Dr. Roy, Sanchita. 'Namasudra and The Matua Religion' *International Journal of Review and Research in Social Science*, vol.07, Issue -03, July- September, 2019.
8. Sarkar, Tarak Chand, Sri Sri Harililamrita, Introduction, Orakandi, Bangladesh, 1322(B.S)
9. Biswas, Biplab & Dr. Mandal, Bipul. "The Role of Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur and Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur to the Social Awakening Movement of the Namasudras: An overview", *International Journal of Creative Research Thought*, vol.8, Issue -7, July 2022.
10. Biswas, Monasanta. "Matua Development Boards: A Historical Review of the United Movement of the Namasudras in Bengal", *Journal of People's History and Culture*, vol.6, No.2, 2022.
11. Bandhopadhaya, Sekhar; Dasgupta, Abhijit and Schendel, Willem van "Bengal Communities Development and State", Manohar Publishers, Delhi, 1994.
12. Biswas, A.K. "The Namasudra of Bengal", Bluemoon Books, New Delhi, 2000.
13. Biswas, N.B & N.R.Roy, "Education of the Scheduled Caste People: Namasudras", Shipra Publications, New Delhi, 2014.
14. Bandhopadhaya, S., & Choudhory, A.B. "The Scheduled Castes movement in West Bengal after Partition", Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group.
15. Biswas, A.K. "Status of Education Development of the Namasudras in West Bengal: Problems and Prospects. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Review*.
16. Biswas, N.B. Emergence of Namasudra as a sub Caste: An ethnological view", Serial Publication.
17. Biswas, Manosanta. "Matua Religious Movement: Caste, Protest, and Socio-Religious Uplift of Namasudras in East Bengal (1842-1947) in being in Bengal, Edited by Biswas, Sankar Kumar & Biswas, Alok Kumar, Mitram, Kolkata, 2015.
18. Bandhopadhaya, Sarbani. "Caste and Politics in Bengal, Economic and Political weekly, December 15, 2012, vol.47, No.50.
19. Biswas, Ratan Kumar. "Namasudra Movement in Bengal (1872-1947): A Case Study of the Transition from Caste Struggle to Political Identity", Progressive Book Forum, Kolkata, 2010.
20. Bandhopadhaya, Sekhar. "A Peasnat Caste in Protest: The Namasudras of Eastern Bengal, 1872-1945", in Caste and Communal Politics in South Asia, Edited by Bandhopadhaya, Sekhar & Das Suranjan. Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1993.
21. Biswas, Sharat Chandra. "Namasudra Sampradayer Atma Katha (The story of Namasudra Community), vol.1, Publishers-Sharmila Biswas, Kolkata, 2005.
22. Biswas, Manosanta. "Banglar Matua Andolal: Samaj Sanskriti Rajniti, Kolkata: Setu Prakashani, 2016.
23. Bandhopadhaya, Sekhar. "Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal", 2004.
24. B.R. Ambedkar, "Writings and Speeches", vol.8.

25. Das, Naresh Chandra. "Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh", Calcutta, 1368 B.S.
26. Dutt, N.K. "Origin and Growth of Caste in India", Firma K.L, Calcutta, 1969.
27. E.A. Gait, Census of India, 1901.
28. Halder, Mahananda. "Sri Sri Guruchand Charit", 5<sup>th</sup> Reprinted Resolution, Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas, W.B. 2009.
29. J.C. Jack. Bengal District Gazetteers: Bakarganj, (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1918).
30. L.S.S. O Malley, Bengal District Gazetteers: Jessore (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1912).
31. Mahanta, Nandadulal. "Matua Andolal O Dalit Jagaron", Annapurna Publication, Calcutta, 2002.
32. Sarkar, Tanaka. "Bengal 1928-1934: The Politics of Protest". Oxford University Press (India), New Delhi, 1987.
33. Sanyal, Hiteshranjan. "Social Mobility in Bengal", Calcutta, 1981.
34. Sarkar, Anil Kumar. "Bengal Namasudras: in Search of Social Identity (1872-1911) in Ethnicity and Regional Politics of Eastern and North East India. Delhi, 2013.
35. Basu, Srimati. "Matua Movement in Bengal." Academic Press, 1974.
36. Bhattacharya, Debjani. "Caste, Religion, and Power: The Matua Movement and the Formation of a New Hindu Identity." Oxford University Press, 2011.
37. Jha, Shakti B. "Dalit Identity and Politics: Matua Movement in Eastern India." Sage Publications, 2002
38. Chakraborty, Mitali. "Religious Identity and Social Transformation: A Case Study of the Matua Movement." South Asian Studies, vol. 38, no. 1, 2021.
39. Jahan, Farhana. "Matua Religion and Social Upliftment: A Comparative Study of Pre- and Post-Independence Period." Indian Journal of Social Sciences, vol. 12, no. 2, 2017.
40. Das, Samar. "Social Movements and the State in India: The Matua Movement in Bengal." Routledge, 2019.
41. Mukherjee, Mithi. "Matua Movement: The Story of a Struggle for Identity." Niyogi Books, 2017.

