

Reassessing the British Raj; Socio-Political Transformation and Marginalization of the Namasudra (Dalit) Community in Colonial Bengal

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Abstract

The present study is primarily based on secondary sources, including books, research articles, and other scholarly works. This article dealt with the socio-political and spiritual movement of the Dalit Namasudra community in colonial Bengal. The paper analyzes the stigma associated with the term 'Chandal' which was ascribed to the Namasudras by the caste Hindu in Bengali society. Through an analysis of their socio-political mobility, the study seeks to evaluate the contribution of British rule and its administrative policies on the Namasudras life. Ultimately, the research focuses on two principal aspects: the impact of British rule on the Namasudra community, and the extent to which the rise of the Namasudras assertion and changed the political landscape of colonial Bengal.

Keywords; Namasudra, colonial Bengal, Matua, Chandal, caste Hindu

Introduction

The Namasudras were the Hindu lower caste community that lived in the Eastern part of Bengal; they were formerly known as 'Chandals' and were treated as untouchables in Hindu Society. The present author will examine socio-political mobilization of the Namasudra community in colonial Bengal. Since the establishment of British Raj in Bengal, the emergence of the Matua religious sect among the lower caste community and contribution of Christian missionaries, and their impact on the lower caste community, proved significant developments in the socio-political life of Namasudras in the British province Bengal. The Namasudras persistently developed a socio-political and cultural life. Moreover, their social awareness and political consciousness of the Namasudras kept them away from the Caste Hindu dominant nationalist movements in colonial Bengal. At the level of organized movement, their exclusion from all sorts of social status, political and professional rights gave a particular shape to their movement. The present author will discuss how, through a protest movement, a particular community identity was constructed by a group of untouchable people in colonial Bengal who began to identify themselves as the Namasudras community in the late 19th century. The politics of Bengal during the Swadeshi era concerning the organized Namasudras movement and patronage of the British government will be discussed. Secondly, the question of why the Namasudra community is continuously far away from the Caste Hindu dominant nationalist movement will be discussed. Thirdly, how did the British policies and socio-political transformations affect the Namasudra community in Bengal?

Historical background

The Namasudras were a socio-economically backward caste group in colonial Bengal. They were historically known as 'Chandals' and treated as untouchables, an Avarna Bengali Hindu community. Their habitation is mainly in six eastern Bengal districts, i.e., Khulna, Bakarganj, Mymensingh, Jessore, Faridpur, and Dacca. But within eastern Bengal again, their major concentration could be found in the marshy tracts of north-west Bakarganj, south Faridpur, and the adjoining Narail and Magura sub-divisions of Jessore and Sadar and Bagerhat sub-divisions of Khulna. The Namasudras, in terms of population, constituted the second-largest Hindu lower caste group in colonial Bengal and the largest in the eastern parts of Bengal. The Namasudras were identified as Chandals by upper caste Hindus from immemorial time, treated them as untouchables in Hindu society and placed them in a lower social position. Such social disabilities created a distance between the lower caste Namasudras and the caste Hindus of Bengal. Since they were considered an untouchable community, they were not allowed to visit public places or places of worship. They were prohibited from collecting water from public tanks, and children were not allowed to impart education while sitting side by side with upper-caste children. Namasudras had to live in separate villages together with their fellow caste group. On account of Brahmanical oppression, a large body of the Namasudras migrated from their original locality in the province and settled in the dreary and unwholesome swamps of the southern area in the past. But upper caste Hindus showed no sympathy for the indignity ascribed to them. The upper caste Brahmins did not officiate socio-religious ceremonies of the untouchable Namasudras. All the social-religious ceremonies of the untouchable community were officiated by their own Brahmins, called Chandaler Brahman. The Namasudras were prohibited from entering the temple or the puja mandaps of the zamindars. They were always allowed to sit separately or on the ground in the court of zamindars, and upper caste Hindus denied having meals sitting side by side with Namasudras, sometimes even cleaning their dishes, and they were not allowed to appear before the bhadralok caste, wearing shoes. The Namasudras launched a combined protest against this ugly practice of Hindu society against them in the late 19th century. They had been struggling to abolish their abusive caste name for a long time, but castes Hindu were not sympathetic to their demand. On account of poverty and dislike, the Namasudras were discriminated against in imparting education to the children. Hence, the parents of the lower caste untouchables sent their children to the Muktabs run by the Muslims, which were open to all castes. They were compelled to live as a distinct community with their fellow caste men, their priests, and their traditions.

The Bengali Hindu society was marked by deep caste hierarchies, systemic discrimination, social injustice, and oppression. Against this backdrop, the emergence of the Matua religious sect under the leadership of Harichand Thakur in the 19th century brought a new hope of socio-religious and political upliftment for the lower caste groups of Bengal like Namasudras. As a result, the Matua religious sect gained popularity among the lower caste communities in colonial Bengal. Matuaism advocated rejection of caste based discrimination, untouchable and advocated equality and spiritual liberation for all backward communities, irrespective of their social status. Matuaism is a path of righteousness and devotion available to all, irrespective of caste. The Matua religion was against the orthodox rituals and idol worship,

advocating a direct and personal connection with the divine. They organized cultural festivals and gatherings became occasions for collective expression and solidarity, strengthening bonds of community and pride among the lower caste, including Namasudras communities. After the death of Harichand Thakur, his son Guru Chand Thakur took leadership of his father's mission socio-religious reforms and spiritual upliftment of the backward community. Guru Chand Thakur consolidated the organizational structure of the Matua community with the help of colonial authority and Baptist missionaries, establishing temples, schools, and community centres to foster religious and educational growth among the lower caste peoples. In addition, Guru Chand Thakur was a strong advocate of education, and he worked tirelessly to spread educational opportunities among the lower caste peoples. He believed that education was the key to social progress and economic empowerment. Moreover, Guru Chand Thakur also focused on social and political reforms. Thereby, he campaigned against caste-based discrimination and worked towards the social and economic empowerment of the Namasudra community. He encouraged his followers to actively participate in social and political movements, advocating for their rights and dignity. The Matua sect laid great emphasis on education because of the caste Hindu zamindars and moneylenders who cheated the backward, illiterate Namasudras peasantry in everyday matters.

The Namasudras movement for social upliftment faced severe hostility from upper-caste Hindus who were afraid that their peasants and workers would no longer work for them once the untouchable Namasudras became literate; even they were not allowed to impart education to their children. That is why, educated Namasudras sought help from Christian missionaries for the spread of education among the backward caste, like Namasudras. Dr C. S. Mead was a prominent figure who immensely helped the Namasudra community in their social upliftment movement. Hence, due to their low social position in the caste hierarchy, the Namasudras had to face severe economic exploitation by local landlords. Overall, in social space, the higher caste Hindus had never accepted the civil rights of the Namasudras. On the other hand, the Caste Hindu zamindar exerted ruthless financial oppression on the Namasudras peasants. The Zamindars of Bengal, most of whom were from the Caste Hindu, had raised zamindari rents, which led to a severe economic burden on the peasants who were predominantly Muslim or Namasudras in eastern Bengal. Their first organized movement of self-affirmation started in late 1872 in the Faridpur-Bakarganj region, when in official documents they were still being referred to as Chandals. Moreover, the immediate occasion was the funeral ceremony of a well-off Chandals headman of the village in Bakarganj. He invited his higher caste neighbours to attend the ceremony and dine in his house, but the upper caste neighbours refused to accept the invitation. The immediate setback impressed upon the Namasudras leaders the necessity of an organized social platform that would bind the backward community together to assert themselves as a collective identity against the caste Hindus of Bengal.

Meanwhile, the Matua Religious sect emerged among the lower caste. Matua sect not only provided a different way of life but also provided a platform for organising themselves as a community under Matua leader Harichan Thakur and later Guruchand Thakur in colonial Bengal. Thus, the Matua religious sect played an important role in the construction of community identity, and it had a profound impact on the socio-economic and political,

religious life of lower caste peoples in colonial Bengal. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as mentioned earlier Namasudras mainly lived in the marshy track of Bengal emerged as a settled peasant community by taking advantage of reclamations in the vast marshy and forest tracts of Eastern Bengal. From the beginning of the 20th century, the Matua sect extended its impact from socio-religious into economic and political activities. With Matua socio-religious education and political and cultural revival, the lower caste Dalits were made to feel dignity and empowerment. They pioneered the socio-political movements in Bengal by fighting for the rights that shaped Bengal's socio-political landscape. Their efforts towards integrating the Namasudra community into the mainstream Indian society in the areas of educational opportunities and social justice, economic self-sufficiency, and political identity and leadership are now part of the ongoing socio-political framework. They held that organised social empowerment movements, grassroots level campaigns against caste discrimination and social exploitation, and economic domination. The Matua religious community emerged as a potent force in Bengal politics, shaping electoral outcomes and influencing policy decisions in colonial Bengal.

Impact of British rule on the Namasudra Caste group

The colonial government also declared in the Charter Act of 1833 that holding any place, office, or employment based on his religion, place of birth, descent, or color be disabled under company rule. The queen in 1858 proclaimed that all in British India were granted equal protection of the law. At the same time, Christian missionaries played a significant role in the spreading of education among the lower caste, they did not confine themselves to the fields of education only, but also in the fields of religion and social welfare and constantly worked to secure human rights for the Dalit Namasudras and help them in the overall development of Namasudra community. The introduction of English education and Western ideas by the British had a significant impact on the backward caste of Bengal. The British government in Bengal had to rectify a series of economic, social, and religious outrages going on against the Namasudras in the late 19th century. Upper-caste Hindus despised the Namasudra Caste by inflicting upon them the stigma of Chandals. The social reforms movement targeted the Hindu's orthodox tradition and ugly practices, such as the Sati system, child marriage, exorbitant dowry, throwing children in Ganga Sagar, polygamy and so on. Thus, the social-religious movement of the lower caste aimed at ending the illiteracy of the lower caste and creating awareness about their social status among the lower caste of society. The Bengali upper caste was bound by the social hierarchy of the caste system, despite the upper caste Hindus having a Western education and having been talked about modernization and taught enlightenment and science. The upper caste Hindus despised the Namasudras by inflicting upon them the stigma of Chandals treating them as untouchables in society. Hence, they raised their voice in protest against this social indignity imposed by upper caste Hindus, actually, they had been struggling to wipe out their abusive caste name 'Chandala' for a long time but the castes Hindu were not supportive of their demand. On the contrary, the British government was sympathetic toward their demand, on step 1883 W, C Macpherson the assistant commissioner of Sylhet district issued an order with the given direction that Namasudras must always be written in placed of Chang or Chandal, the said in case anyone who does not write Namasudra shall be removed from employment.

Moreover, the major effects of British rule on the Dalit Namasudra community were the introduction of educational reforms, education through the English language, and Western ideas profound impact on the Namasudra community. It was the colonial government that had made education accessible to all irrespective of caste or creed. The British administration realized the importance of education for their governance and administration and established schools, colleges, and separate hostels across Bengal. This enabled the individuals of lower caste communities including the Namasudra community to acquire education that was previously unreachable to them, which paved the way for social mobility and empowerment of the Namasudra community. The British education system opened up the door of educational institutes to all irrespective of caste which replaced the conservative education system of the Brahmins. As a result, well-segment of lower caste began to send their boys to the school. As discussed earlier the Christian missionaries also played an important role in the spreading of education among the lower caste people of colonial Bengal. While access to education initially remained confined to lower caste communities, more importantly, the efforts of social reformers Hari Chand Thakur, Guru Chand Thakur, and Christian missionaries led to the expansion of educational opportunities for lower caste communities, mainly the Namasudras of Bengal. In Bengal, the Namasudras got many benefits as a result of British rule. There is no doubt that the British government such encouragement increased the bonding of Namasudras with the British Raj. Furthermore, the British implemented land reforms aimed at increasing agricultural productivity and revenue collection. These reforms, such as the Permanent Settlement of 1793 and consecutive land tenure systems, sought to authorize property rights and promote investment in land. While the impact of these reforms varied across regions, some Namasudra families were able to benefit from land ownership. Moreover, later recognition of tenant rights, with greater security of tenure and protection against arbitrary eviction by landlords, fixation of fair rent mechanisms for determining fair rents for tenants, regulation of landlord powers with greater legal safeguards, protection for sharecroppers including many Dalit Namasudra communities, was given legal protection. Overall the reforms of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1928 aimed to rebalance the power between landlords and tenants, providing greater security and rights to tenants, including backward communities like the Namasudra community.

At the beginning of 20th century the British policy had two objectives firstly to established social equality and secondly gaining the support from the backward community to break down the growing nationalism movement of the elite Hindu. During the colonial rule, the backward caste peoples did not question on the British administration as they were given social justice, education, and financial grants to them, after centuries of inhuman treatment at the hands of the caste Hindu of Bengal. Moreover, the emergence of socio-political organizations of the different lower castes was a result of British policies. The first colonial administration made inroads into the traditional caste structure by introducing market economy. Hence, the colonial government introduced competition in place of caste institutions in the economic system thereby abolishing the occupational monopoly of different upper castes of Bengal. Secondly, it developed caste consciousness which manifested itself in the form of organized socio-political movement. The British rule brought about a renaissance among the different lower caste communities including the Namasudras

community. Competitions in economic structure replace the caste factor in economic transactions and production. By making education open for all they declared that careers were open for all based on talent. In this way, the British system of education and the new economic relationship generated new hope among the backward community who found in it a golden opportunity to throw away caste based oppression.

By the beginning of the 20th century, a small number of the Namasudras of eastern Bengal became prosperous, taking advantage of the newly developed economic system under British rule. Under British rule, the Namasudras of Bengal also developed a separate social and cultural identity that was distinct from caste Hindus. They started learning English and started living with dignity and self-respect after breaking free from retrograde traditions and customs. Getting government jobs enhanced their social status. Moreover, the leader of the lower caste community chose the path of constitutional politics and demanded rights in employment, representation, and education. On the other hand, in the early twentieth century nationalist movement was started against British rule by the high-caste Hindu bhadralok demanding higher self-governance and began to question the British Raj. The partition of Bengal in 1905 and the subsequent Swadeshi movement had profound impacts on various communities within Bengal, including the Namasudra community. It aimed at boycotting British goods and promoting indigenous products. The Namasudras, were a backward community as they were often associated with occupations deemed inferior by the nationalist upper caste elites leading the Swadeshi movement. That is why Namasudra was kept away from the nationalist movement. The partition and the Swadeshi movement made Namasudras politically conscious cultural resurgence, and educational empowerment within the community. They became increasingly aware of their rights and demanded the rights and upliftment of their community and started participating in political activities. The legacy of these events continues to shape the socio-political landscape of Bengal and the collective identity of the Namasudra community.

During the anti-partition movement of Bengal led by their haters and persecutors, the Namasudras remained away from any activity against the British rule as they receive greater attention from the new administration. The British government at the same time was primarily preoccupied with the task of ensuring the loyalty of this section of the people of eastern Bengal. Namasudra was also thinking along the same lines. In 1905 the Namasudra on behalf of Dacca Namasudra Hetaishini Samiti apprised the lieutenant governor about their social economic conditions of the Namasudra community and demanded similar political rights as those granted to the Muslims. Later Sashi Bhushan Thakur leaders of Namasudra made contact with Nawab Sali Mullah of Dacca and together they decided that Muslims and Namasudras would not support the movement against partition. This political attitude later on became clearly discernible in a number of Namasudra resolutions adopted in the course of the year 1906. This political stand of Lower caste Hindus can be identified into two features in undivided Bengal -alignment with Muslims and loyalty to the British government. There is no doubt caste consciousness and political awareness promoted such a course of action as the educated Namasudra now were looking for proportional representation in public employment so that they could get jobs with fewer qualifications than the upper-caste Hindus. When a distinct Scheduled Caste politics emerged in this province in the early twentieth century, it

was this community that provided it with the necessary leadership as well as its major support base. However, the events of 1906 made the Nationalist leadership aware of the situation and conscious of the fact that unless they could mobilize the large Namasudra caste their movement had little chance of success. The upper caste Hindu publicly urges the Namasudras leader and advocate Hindu unity and promise social equality. They were urged to attend meetings and were promised social and other favors if they participated in the Swadeshi movement.

On the other hand, the Namasudra leaders like Guruchand, his son Sashi Bhusan, and their associates were also active in counteracting such nationalist attempts to mobilize the peasantry. They assiduously tried to dissuade their caste people from joining the boycott movement on the grounds 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 the rich people for furthering their own self-interest and the poor peasants had no interests involved in it. The effect of partition would not reach the untouchable Namasudra community of eastern Bengal, while its withdrawal would not bring any benefit to lower caste peoples. On the contrary, the Namasudras might be profit from loyalty to the British rule 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 these were cheap. Guruchand emphasized those nationalist leaders, 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 society (Chatterjee S. S.). To break down the nationalist movement, the British first tried to gain support from the Muslims and later equally mobilize the Hindu lower caste peoples in support of their rule. During that time colonial government granted special privileges in matters of education, employment, and constitutional rights first to Muslims and then to the Hindu backward caste. Colonial policy was partly to address the existing social inequality and partly to gaining supports from larger lower caste Hindus, those who were away from the growing nationalist movement led by caste Hindus. Their first initiative to develop a separate social-political identity among the Hindu it had come on the eve of the census of 1911 when the commissioner circulated an instruction to enumerate them separately from other Hindus. Such attempts at the classification of Hindu society were the result of a continuing shift in the colonial policy toward protective discrimination in favor of certain backward social groups like whose loyalty had to be ensured to balance off the influence of the nationalist leaders of colonial Bengal.

Moreover, the Communal Award 1932 was the major political reform brought by British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald in August as a response to demands for increased representation from various communities in India. It aimed to allocate seats in the legislature based on communal identities, particularly religion and caste, rather than through general elections. The Namasudras were one of the largest communities in Bengal that were engaged in agricultural work, fishing, and other forms of manual labor. They were part of the Depressed Classes that historically faced denial of social, economic, and political opportunities Furthermore, British political reforms subsidized the negative impact of

discrimination where reserving seats for Depressed Classes in legislative councils, inclusive of Bengal Legislative Council, was introduced. This legislative change attempted to remedy the political marginalization of many lower-caste groups such as Namasudra. Reserved seat policies aid the Namasudra's in advancing politically where they are able to protect and promote their interests [6]. This gave rise to Namasudra leaders who adeptly catered to the NRC community's concerns and leadership aspirations. Alongside this, political reform offered the Namasudra community a politically empowered identity, recognition, and agency. It accepted dominant social orders and helped the Namasudra claim their identity within the Namasudra identity political landscape. The Communal Award was opposed by Hindus of higher castes with this arrangement because the reserved seats for lower-caste constituencies politically empowered dominated community. They rejected the notion of separate electorates and reservations because of the possible loss of power and privilege. In colonial Bengal, the pigeon holing of reserved places under the Allocation, Award deepened the communal Cleavages. It widened the fractures arrayed along religious and caste lines and threatens to sharpen existing strife and rival communal violence. The allocation of reserved places under the Communal Award aided in the raising the lower castes such as Namasudra into the legislative chambers where they could put forward grievances and interests and impose advocates masters of policies to be adopted. It promoted further the voices of the politically active silenced citizens.

The political mobilization of the Dalit Namasudras is attributed to the impact by the 1932 Communal Award as it marked a new beginning in the recognition of their political representation and participation. Subsequently a new self-aware, self-asserting, politically cognizant and active populace emerged that demanded appeal to their rights. Even after the attainment of freedom in India, the Namasudras actively claimed for their representation. Also, the 1932 Award has exercised an acute political bearing over the Namasudra caste in Bengal and in turn marks the history of Pre and Post-colonial era, The Award brought opportunities for political representation which served to politically polarize and communalize the society. The impact still is seen today and clearly indicates that India continues to struggle with achieving balance among these fundamental attributes.

Conclusion

To sum up, the British rule had both positive and negative impacts on the Namasudra community in Bengal. The social discrimination present was highly dependent on the initial policies and practices set by the government. Social and political reforms made through education were made later on which helped improve the strife. The social landscape still remains active and with change due to British colonialism. With coming of Christian missionaries the Namasudra community was largely benefitted in realm of education. The impact of British rule on the Namasudra community was profound since they faced both challenges and some change. During the Colonial period, there were benefits such as social mobility, education, and political participation, which strengthened socio-political life of Namasudras. The British also brought economic reforms which worsened the existing social structure.

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