

## Caste and Identity Issues: Namasudra in Colonial Bengal: A Historical Review

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### ABSTRACT:

Namasudras are recognized as the lower caste people of East Bengal. There is much debate about the origin of the Namasudras. Namasudras are an agricultural community of East Bengal. They earned their livelihood by doing agricultural work. With the help of Sri Harichand Tagore and his son Guruchand Tagore of the Matua community, the Namasudras gradually emerged as a well-organized community. They protested against the hegemony of the Hindu ritual system and the hegemony of the upper caste gentry in colonial Bengal.

**Keywords:** Namasudra, Guruchand, Hindu ritual, Hegemony, Matua, Harichand,

The Namasudra community was formerly known as Chandal, a term generally considered a pun. They lived outside the four-tier ritual caste system and were therefore outcasts and untouchables in the eyes of the Hindu 'high caste' community. Among the lower caste communities, the Namasudra community was a significant Dalit Hindu community in Bengal during the colonial period. The Namasudras were subjected to various forms of abuse, deprivation and discrimination by the upper caste Hindus. Also the Namasudras were variously exploited by the government and landlords. Among the underdeveloped communities of Bengal, the Namasudra community was particularly united. Namasudras started a movement against the social oppression, deprivation and discrimination of caste Hindus. Apart from Namasudra Matua, Teli, Mali, Kumbhkar, Chamar, Kapali, Kamar, Pod, Malakar etc. classes took part in this movement. They tried to protect their own interests through the movement.

The Namasudras of Bengal organized and agitated for various reasons. In 1916 CE in Dhaka and 1917 CE in Calcutta, Namasudra conferences expressed outrage that Namasudras were mostly poor peasants and labourers. They are oppressed by upper caste landlords. The religious leadership of Harichand and Guruchand Tagore was especially helpful in uniting the Namasudras. According to historian Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, upper caste Hindus and Syed Muslims had exclusive rights over land in areas dominated by Namasudras. On the other hand, the Namasudras were agriculturalists, landless farmers and labourers. It was under these conditions that the Namasudras realized the need for education and employment for economic advancement. Like the Vaishnavas, the religious guru of the Matuas, Srigruru Chand Tagore, preached the ideals of equality and the end of casteism. He also emphasizes

the principle of action. Harichand Tagore asked his followers to build Hari Mandir instead of going to caste Hindu temples or ceremonies and be diligent in worship. Ignoring the Vedas, he talks about giving people a place above all. He said, "Hand, Kama, Naam, Name" is the mantra for the liberation of people. He preached to his followers to educate and earn money in order to mobilize and motivate them. Guru Chand Tagore established the 'Bengal Namasudra Association' in 1912 AD to strengthen internal unity among the Matuas. The name 'Namasudra' was legalized in place of the disrespectful name 'Chandal' in the polls of 1911 AD in compliance with the main demands of the leaders leading the Namasudra movement. In 1916 AD, the Namasudras conference organized in Dhaka and Calcutta called for the liberation of the Namasudras from the exploitation of caste-Hindu landlords in the society. Abolition of child marriage and polygamy, prevalence of widow marriage, abolition of caste system, righteous living etc. were among the programs of Namasudra movement. It has a social and organizational history long before independent India.

In the early 20th century, they were still not 'Namasudras', outside the village they lived in 'swamps' called 'Chandals', the temple doors were closed to them. However, it is the largest tribal community in East Bengal as the 'Ajlachal' sub-community. The 'Chandals' were despised and economically deprived by the upper caste Brahmin, Kayastha, landlords, mahajans. Guru Chand Tagore, said that whether we live or die, it does not harm us, we want to build schools in villages and he often said that 'Jar dal nai, tar bal nai'. All this shook the Hindu society of East Bengal. None of the social reformers envisioned his ideal of universal education. Maa Ishwar Gain of Dattadanga, Khulna presided over the Shradhana ceremony of Namasudra representatives from 18 parganas. In 1872-73, they continued the 'social boycott movement' of not working in Nakra haat, not cooking, not doing agriculture, not going to market etc. Although their movement failed, they felt the need to gain self-respect and dignity among the Namasudras. The Namasudra movement of 1911 was strengthened under the leadership of Guru Chand Tagore.

The 'All Bengal Namsudra Association' was formed in 1912 under the chairmanship of Mukunda Bihari Mallick. By 1928, it had a strong network through branches in 22 districts of Bengal. To raise funds, he used to remove a handful of rice every day before cooking and submit it to the village committee every month. The money earned from there is spent on the development of village roads, construction of schools, marriage of poor people's daughters etc. For the sake of social development, Guru Chand Tagore formed 'Namsudra Kalyan Samiti' out of a sense of responsibility. In almost every Namasudra village of Faridpur, Dhaka, Khulna, Bakerganj, the existence of the association was welcomed in meetings and gatherings. In 1908, the Bengali Provincial Congress at Pabna passed a resolution calling for an end to the discriminatory practice of the Chandals, as Guru Charan Tagore, a Namasudra patriarch, social reformer and religious leader of Faridpur, had strongly advocated the partition of Bengal, and opposed the Swadeshi movement in 1905. Sir Surendra Nath Banerjee wrote a letter to the Namasudra leader, urging him to join his millions of followers in the Swadeshi movement, known as Matua. But Gurucharan Tagore rejected his request.

He said that the upper castes were consumers of luxury goods imported from abroad and therefore movement should be restricted to them. He also said that the Namasudras were oppressed and discriminated against in their own country. The upper castes, if they do not develop fraternal relations with these untouchable and depressed classes, will never participate in the Swadeshi movement.

Several memoranda were submitted on behalf of the All-Bengal Namasudras Association and the All-Bengal Depressed Classes Association. A joint delegation of these two associations gave oral evidence to the Simon Commission in 1929, and their complaints were made under the leadership of Mukunda Behari Mallick, a Namasudra. The Namasudras' memorandum states that "the upper castes virtually closed the doors of schools against members of the Depressed Classes in India during pre-British rule. According to the All-Bengal Depressed Classes Association, untouchable patients "were not admitted to medical colleges and hospitals in Calcutta for treatment," was a reality in Bengal. Raicharan Biswas wrote in his book National Awakening in 1921 brahmins we may dislike, but if we observe our clear have to admit that the Namasudras caste are descendants of ancient sages and rishis that is pure Brahmin. Secondly, our profession is agriculture, and agriculture is a noble profession and we can be proud of Guru Chand also campaigned against the landlords and their exploitation. In 1921, Mukund Bihari Mallik and Bhishmadev Das, both members of the Bengal Legislative Council, demanded a law that would give two-thirds of the crops to sharecroppers. This was the origin of the Tevanga movement, which was later taken over by the Bengali communists with the support of the peasants..In the Bengal Assembly elections of 1937, there were 30 reserved constituencies and 12 Namasudras won – 10 were followers of Guruchand and two represented the Congress. All of them bear the stamp of Guru Chand's personality. In the 1930s, a section of Namasudras supported British Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald's 'Communal Award' announced on 16 August 1932. Since then, the farmers belonging to the Namasudra community were organized under the leadership of Jogendranath Mandal, Bhirat Chandra Mandal etc. and supported the Krishok Praja Party. After the death of Harichand Tagore, Guruchand Tagore and after the death of Guruchand Tagore, Pramatha Ranjan Tagore and Jogendra Nath Mandal led the Namasudra movement. The Namasudras under the leadership of Pramatha Ranjan Tagore and Jogendra Nath Mondal decided to cooperate with the National Congress by forming the 'Independent Scheduled Caste Party' in 1938. As a result, the national movement gained special momentum. However, their movement lost momentum when the Nama-Sudra-dominated East Bengal was included in Pakistan as a result of partition in 1947.

The lower castes felt the need for agitation against the oppressive upper castes more than the benefits provided by the British government. Hindu solidarity soon realized that the isolation of the lower castes could hamper plans to offer united opposition to the British and Muslims. Later, the Sarva Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha, Bharat Sevaram Sangh, etc. started actively mobilizing the lower castes. They never forgot the insults and hatred from the upper caste political leaders. Instead of directly protesting, they withdrew their political support

and quietly sided with the Congress. Consequently, due to lack of support from the lower caste Namasudras, Rajvanshis and Poundras, the Congress had to withdraw from political power to form the government in Bengal. At the Khulna Namasudra conference in 1930, Guru Chand Tagore demanded lower caste representation in education, employment and legislative representation for backward castes. He said that 'the emancipation of the lower castes and untouchables will never be accomplished unless and until they share in political power'.

Lower castes in Bengal were unable to enter mainstream politics due to the conservatism of the upper castes, and as a result, were forced to withdraw from the Congress in the 1938 elections and later in the formation of the government of Bengal. In the 1947 elections on the eve of Partition, a large section of the Namasudras supported the Congress, but knowing that the partition of Bengal would spell doom for the nation's future, they defected to the Congress. Immediately the strong united movement of the Namasudras came to an end. Matua leader PR Thakur continued to oppose the division of Bengal despite being in the Congress, but after the Noakhali and Comilla riots he changed his opinion and started supporting the division of Bengal. Politically, the Namasudras demanded separate elections and increased representation in autonomous bodies. The British government was also sympathetic to the Namasudras. So the Namasudras also did not actively participate in the anti-British movement. .

## **CONCLUSION:-**

People of other castes were considered Namasudras as Chandals and as a result they started losing their power, reputation. Even loses right to rights, property, education etc. and like other Shudras of Bengal were considered untouchables. Even during the British period, the Namasudra community chandals were considered to be. They were against it protested and started a movement against the so-called upper castes. As the demands of the Namasudras were not met in the Reform Act of 1919 AD, they gradually became pro-British and advanced to fulfill their demands. They supported the communal partition policy of 1932 AD. On the other hand, they opposed the national movement, because according to them, the national movement was a movement of the upper caste Hindu gentry.

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