

<https://doi.org/10.37948/ensemble-2020-0201-a002>



BRITISH POLICY OF 'PROTECTIVE DISCRIMINATION' AND ITS IMPACT: A CASE STUDY ON UNDERPRIVILEGED SECTION OF THE SOCIETY IN BENGAL

Bipul Mandal ¹✉

Article Ref. No.:

20011140N1BLBL

Article History:

Submitted on 11 Jan 2020

Accepted on 17 Mar 2020

Published online on 20 Mar 2020

Keywords:

downtrodden, depressed classes,
struggle, untouchability,
constitution, inequality,
consciousness

Abstract:

Protective discrimination is the policy of granting special privileges to the downtrodden and the underprivileged sections of society. It is generally based on race, ethnicity, gender, or geographical location. During the second half of the Nineteenth Century, the British Government decided to take special measures for the welfare of the 'depressed classes'. By the 1880s, special schools, scholarships, and other assistance for the depressed classes had been established, both by the British Government and by the native rulers. The British officers in India, therefore, were strongly motivated to work for the social upliftment of the Depressed Classes. A significant outcome of these ameliorative measures on the part of the British was that the depressed classes were grateful and dependent on Englishmen in their quest for equality. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay explains the situations that led to the application of the device of 'protective discrimination' particularly when the high Caste Hindu 'bhadralok' began to question the legitimacy of the raj at the turn of the century. Unlike other parts of Bengal, in North Bengal, reservation policy has created complex social relationships among the inhabitants, both indigenous and migrants.

I

Introduction

Protective discrimination is the policy of granting special privileges to the downtrodden and the underprivileged sections of society. It is generally based on race, ethnicity, gender, or geographical location. These are affirmative action

¹ [First Author] ✉ [Corresponding Author] Assistant Professor and Head, Department of History, Kaliyaganj College, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, INDIA; **Email: bipulmandalkg@gmail.com**



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

programs most visible in both the United States and India, where there has been a history of racial and caste discrimination. In an ancient culture dating back to thousands of years, frequently invaded by men of different races and religions, India and Indians stood out as a unique example of a multi-racial, multi-lingual, and multi-religious society. Social inequality is perhaps a universal feature of all societies. It is a sure and confident that there has not been and does not exist, any permanent social group which is 'flat' and in which all members are equal. The traditional caste system, which places Brahmins at the top and untouchables at the bottom of the caste pyramid, is one of the most obvious institutions of inequality. Some have called it a system of legalized inequality, a system in which one's role and status in society are determined by non-rational principles. Everything was determined at birth and by heredity one's position in society, one's profession, norms of behavior, rights, and duties. Anderson and Parker have defined caste as 'the extreme form of social class organization in which the position of individuals in the status hierarchy is determined by descent and birth.'¹ For more than three millennia, a system of social inequality and social stratification was foisted on a large segment of the hapless population.

Composed of many diverse races, with many different customs, languages and religions people were able to live together with a degree of stability in a multiple societies due to of the caste system. Hutton says 'has proved capable of absorbing any intrusions on society, and no intruders have yet succeeded in revolutionizing it, though it is not so rigid that caste cannot rise in the social scale.'² Each caste became an individual social unit. Each caste started observing its rituals of eating, drinking, and their lifestyle, intermarrying, and so on. Of the approximate three thousand castes in India, some are derived from tribal or racial elements, others were members of common guilds or crafts, while some were religious in origin.

During the second half to the Nineteenth Century, the British Government decided to take extraordinary measures for the welfare of the 'depressed classes'. By the 1880s, special schools, scholarships, and other assistance for the depressed classes had been established, both by the British Government and by the native rulers. The British officers in India, therefore, were strongly motivated to work for the social upliftment of the Depressed Classes. A significant outcome of these ameliorative measures on the part of the British was that the depressed classes were grateful and dependent on Englishmen in their quest for equality.

The Government of India Act passed in December 1919 made no provision for the representation of the lower classes in joint or separate electorates there were indications that the Government always remained very sympathetic to them so far as their other demands were concerned. This is because the colonial Government had already established the ideology of differentiation, which motivated it to underpin a central dichotomy between the privileged higher castes at the one end and the lower castes at the other. Then in order to neutralize the social tension likely to arise out of this central dichotomy of the traditional society, the colonial Government had evolved a policy of 'protective discrimination' by which the Government sought to grant special favour in matters of education, employment and constitutional rights, first to the Muslims and then to the lower classes later called the 'Scheduled castes'.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has explained the situations that led to the application of the device of 'protective discrimination' particularly when the high caste Hindu *bhadralok* began to question the legitimacy of the raj at the turn of the century. In order to contain the intensifying anti-imperialist agitation, the British first tried to rally the Muslims and then, with equal consistency, sought to mobilize the 'Hindu 'depressed classes' in support of their rule.³ Bandyopadhyay also feels that the demand for reservation is at one end a manifestation of the weak response of certain lower castes to the nationalist movement and at another end is also the political idiom of a 'new social category called the 'depressed classes' constructed by the sociological discourse and subsequently politicized by the policy of 'protective discrimination.'⁴ If his views sound a little harsh, Gail Omvedt's assessment appears to be not too mellowed either. She believes that the general reservation policy during the 1920s and 1930s led to a situation in which the 'non-Brahmins' became a loose and contentious alliance of different caste groups and communities, engaged in political opposition to the dominant Brahmins but quarreling about each other's share of the general allotment. She further quotes V.K. Nataraj, who saw in the scramble nothing more than sheer 'maneuvering for a share of the pie.'⁵ Barun De finds in the movement of the lower castes a 'little nationalist' sentiment, which was also a part of a particular view of history. In this, De argues 'caste' appeared to be the most legitimate reference category. In the 1920s and 1930s, it was raised to the level of an ideology. Its structure was similar to the ideology of Muslim *qaumior millat* or fanatical Hindu communalism, which at the same time broke up British Indian political integration, again under original colonialist sponsorship.⁶

The different constituents of the community had been seeking different ways to re-orientate the relation of power in indigenous society. From the very beginning, therefore, different levels of consciousness and varied forms of action could be detected in the same movement. In the administrative sphere, the British policy of 'protective discrimination' widened employment opportunities for the Namasudras. This policy was motivated by the two-fold objectives of the removal of social inequality and to get the support of the depressed classes in curbing the rising tide of nationalism. During this period, the depressed class, especially the Namasudras, did not question the legitimacy of British rule as it gave social justice to them after centuries of inhuman treatment at the hands of the upper caste Hindus. The facilities that were provided reservation mainly helped the advanced section within the community. It was this prospect of acquiring power that brought the Rajbansi leaders closer to the British Government. This movement was confined to getting favor from the British by expressing an unflinching loyalty towards them. The same was the case with other lower caste movements as well.

The colonial rulers opened avenues of opportunity for the depressed classes, which helped their rise in social and economic scale. During this period, Rajbansis and the Namasudras and other backward classes did not question the legitimacy of the British Raj as it gave social justice to them after centuries of oppression at the hands of the caste Hindus. Though caste disabilities in Bengal were not so acute as it prevailed in other parts of India. So they considered human dignity is more important than anything else.

II

Acquired Reservation policy from the Colonial Government

Reservation policies, which are the essence of 'protective discrimination', have been the subject of controversy and heated debate wherever they have been implemented. Various schemes of the kind, for reverse discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, or geographical location have been enforced in many developed and developing countries. These policies have evolved as a response to some socio-political issues, peculiar to that particular region, originating from the persistent disparities and the region's history of discrimination and marginalization. Generally, in India, lower castes and tribals have been the victims of discrimination.

There were also instances when the members of the Rajbansi community suffered from humiliating ill-treatment and hatred from upper castes and others. It was under this social degradation, and the Rajbansi leader Panchanan Barma sacrificed his life for the social recognition of Kshatriya status in the social hierarchy system. In the adoption of ritual symbols of a higher Varna status, this group saw their alleviation in the caste hierarchy. On the other hand, the problems of the backward and illiterate sections of the community were not linked to such issues. Instead, it was a mere claim for higher Varna status or change in cultural practices without a change in their economic status. Realizing this fact, Panchanan Barma, the leader of the Rajbansi Kshatriya movement, confined caste movement to the articulation of the demand for being enlisted as a Scheduled Caste, so that they could enjoy special protection (policy of Protective Discrimination) in education, employment and in the matters of representation in the Legislative Council and their local bodies.

III

Impact of 'Protective Discrimination' policy

Throughout the different process and controversial arguments, the Rajbansis entered in the list of Scheduled Caste in 1933.⁷ The framer of the Indian Constitution also adopted the term Scheduled Castes coined by the British. After Independence, as per Article 341 of the Indian constitution, the Rajbansis remain as Scheduled Caste in West Bengal. This inclusion, no doubt, helped the community in getting special privileges in education, employment, and representation in the legislative council and the local bodies. But the irrelevance between their claim of social position and the special privileges achieved as a member of the Scheduled Caste category had to put an identity crisis to the community. Some controversies were there within and without the Rajbansi society in accepting the new Scheduled Caste status. However, the Rajbansi leaders could manage to overcome these controversies arguing that the category of 'Scheduled' was not related with ritual and social hierarchical status of caste and that the category Scheduled caste just referred to certain caste included in a schedule for the economic and electoral purpose; hence there was no ground for having any misgiving.^{8,9} Thus acquiring Kshatriya status in one hand, enter the list of Scheduled Caste on the other, put the community to an identity question. In this respect, the social movement of the

Rajbansi community differs from the other viz. Paundra Kshatriya, Malla Kshatriya, and Ugra Kshatriya. In the nineteenth century, the Paundra Kshatriya, Malla Kshatriya, and Ugra Kshatriya claimed higher status through Kshatriya movement, but they did never claim separate ethnic issues and reservations.

Unlike other parts of Bengal, in North Bengal, reservation policy has created a complicated social relationship among the inhabitants, both indigenous and migrants. Grievances regarding the sharing of reservation benefits resulted in unprecedented social tension in the region, which is still a continuing phenomenon. It is interesting to note that, in spite of such socio-economic tension the undercurrent of cultural fusion and assimilation is simultaneously working in the region, for instance, the Bhaoiya of the Rajbansis and *Bhatiyali* of the refugee migrants from East Pakistan, now in Bangladesh, have become part and parcel of the life of the people in this region.

A unique feature of the politics of post-partition North Bengal, particularly of the post-Panchayat reforms of the 1973 period, was the introduction of the reservation of seats for the tribal communities in the Panchayati system. Since the implementation of the said system, the entire scenario has rapidly changed. It is interesting to notice that those people, who were not at all the habitants of the region before 1865, now they are in a dominant position in the politics of the region and the makers of the future politics and political groups. We see a similar instance of some overseas Indians of South East Asia, South Africa, and some Caribbean Countries. The forefathers of today's statesmen, political leaders of those former British colonies, went as labourers. Their offspring, within a few decades, became the makers of the future of those countries, and a good percentage of the citizens belong to Indian by origin.

Therefore, opposition came from the caste Hindus of Bengal, and the Rajbansis considered this opposition as a hindrance towards the way of their re-installation into the Hindu fold and revivalism for social uplift. This problem, however, was considered by the leaders of the community of later generations. They launched several movements for a separate state in response to the non-recognition of them as well as their historical past which had been part and parcel of the history of Bengal and society. Although the Rajbansis first started the movement, other minor groups of people also got influenced by the movement of social uplift in the same line. For instance, the Rabhas of North Bengal initiated their movement to recognize their place in the Hindu social structure.

IV

Impact on other communities

Another interesting point is that, amongst the tribes both in the hill and plain areas, the Christian missionaries became more beneficiaries than the counterparts of their traditional religion. It is true that the language and culture of the majority group of people dominate the minority communities. In the late seventies a number of minority groups and communities, both indigenous and migrants, have become conscious of their own culture, language etc. and started the movement for restoring and developing of their own languages, cultures et., for instance, the movement of the Suryapuri, Bodo, Rabha etc.

The region is backward so far as industrialization is concerned both during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Moreover, after Independence, more other communities had been brought under reservation category through the recommendation of various commissions viz. Kalelkar Commission (1955), Mandal Commission (1979) etc. As the scope of inclusion under reservation category increased, a number of communities put forward their demand for the inclusion under reservation category.¹⁰ For instance, the Chains of Malda district demanded the inclusion of their name under the scheduled caste category though their demand was recognized after the period of our study. Similarly, the Nagar, Dhanuk communities demanded scheduled caste status. In the hill of Darjeeling also the Tamang Buddhists started the movement for getting scheduled tribe status. It is interesting to note that most of the communities in the hills who were already under the scheduled caste category had started demanding scheduled tribe status from the Govt. However, all these movements came into existence after the publication of the Mandal Commission Report.

What is more important in this respect is that though the number of people with reservation status increased, the scope of employment had not been increased to the required level. Another important fact is that due to the absence of any training course or infrastructure of such institutions in the region, the local people could not succeed in competitions for various examinations, and the 'outsiders' and the refugees became able to get such opportunities.¹¹ Therefore an unprecedented conflict had been started among the scheduled caste groups' people themselves. This type of discontent is distinct from other parts of West Bengal. It has already mentioned earlier that in other areas, particularly in the southern Bengal, the refugees settled largely (next to the North Bengal in terms of their numbers). The scheduled caste refugees and scheduled caste indigenous people belong to the same origin, i.e., Indo-Aryan, but the scheduled caste refugees and indigenous scheduled caste people are of different stock ethnically. The latter belong to the Indo-Mongoloid origin. It has viewed by scholars that it is due to this ethnic difference the conflict took the shape of confrontation.¹² The indigenous people formed several organizations since 1966 viz. Uttarbanga Sanskritik Parishad's Movement, Hamar Sangh Movement, Bharatiya Tapashil Mission Movement etc. the leaders of the movements propagated that the refugees have been encroaching on their due share of opportunities in all aspects from agriculture to education to Govt. services in rural and urban areas of this region.¹³ All these associations and organizations reflected the same grievances and discontent of the indigenous people.

V

Rapid change of socio-economic life of Rajbansi and Namasudras

The situation began to change from the late nineteenth century with the migration of the upper Caste Hindu gentry in northern Bengal. Not only did they consolidate their position as non-cultivating gentry, they also came to form a middle class at the village level. The majority of the Zamindari agents and the staff of the local *cutchery* were recruited. Taking the advantages of the backwardness of the local cultivators or poor *rayats*, they began to exploit them.¹⁴ The attitude of the

Jotedars belonging to the local groups also changed substantially as they came in contact with these upper-caste gentries. The prevailing practice of the *Jotedars* themselves cultivating their lands was now increasingly discontinued and a class of non-cultivating *Jotedars* expanded.¹⁵

Another vital reason for land transfer to the non-Rajbansis was the migration of a large number of outsiders to a different district of North Bengal. The attractions of this region were the abundance of land, the possibility of good business, job opportunities in government offices as the local people were not in a position to compete, and the lure of the tea garden, which provided job facilities for the Babus as well as the labourers.¹⁶

After the partition, the nature of the ownership of lands had changed drastically. Most of the cultivators were found to belong to the Rajbansi community. The district-wise Census Reports of 1951 (district statistical handbooks) show that almost all the districts of North Bengal had similar scenario. However, after Independence, there was a qualitative change in the ownership of land.¹⁷ Particularly after the recovery of lands, there was the question of distribution of those lands to the landless cultivators. Like other parts of West Bengal, the Government was busy to give priority to the cause of rehabilitation and problems of the refugees¹⁸, which became a burning problem to the then Government- both the State and the Center. Therefore most of the vested lands were distributed to those landless refugees.¹⁹ ²⁰It deserves to be mentioned here that at this time, the Rajbansi Kshtriya Samiti, in its meeting at a village named Chechakhaj in Alipurduar sub-Division in 1955 under the presidentship of Upendra Nath Barman, took a resolution stating that the Government should give priority at the time of distribution of those surplus lands (which the Government had recovered due to the abolition of Zamindari Act) to the Rajbansi landless cultivators as they are the original inhabitants of the region and depending entirely on land. The resolution also recommended the inclusion of one representative from the Rajbansi community in the land distribution committee.²¹

So far as the problems of the Rajbansi *Jotedar* were concerned, their situation had phenomenally deteriorated. Unlike the Zamindars of eastern and central Bengal, they did not engage themselves in other economic enterprises. They did not show any interest in giving their offspring education or involve them in trade, commerce, and industry. Instead, the land was their sole source of livelihood.²² A good number of *Jotedars* from Rangpur became landless after partition and settled in North Bengal districts. They also had to face unprecedented miseries. It has been argued by scholars that the land acquisition policy of the United Front Government created fear amongst the *Jotedars* and big landowners of the region because the land was not only their source of livelihood but also a symbol of high social status.

Another interesting point is that though a few *Jotedars* kept in hidden a few lands²³, yet in the long run, they could not retain such lands with them. The reason behind such act was that within a very short span of time, the land-price increased. They again sold off their lands to the refugee migrants for more profit, because they could not cope with the rapid change that had taken place surrounding them due to their laziness and age-long dependency on fate.²⁴ According to the sociologists, migrants always are vibrant; this became true with the refugees of

North Bengal. Moreover, during this time, the poor Nepalis from eastern Nepal migrated and began to settle in the Khas lands of the plain Terai and Duars. Thus at the time of distribution of the *khas lands* (Vested land) to the landless cultivators, the opportunity of occupying Khas lands was taken by the 'outsiders' compared to the landless Rajbansis.²⁵ So a sense of deprivation among the landless Rajbansis developed and discontentment however started among them²⁶

Another area of discontentment was the rapid change in the economic life of the people of this region. It has already mentioned that the people of this region were basically the peasants and agricultural labourers which signifies that they were exclusively dependent on land. The local Rajbansis, as mentioned earlier, that they were under the scheduled caste category. Moreover, the refugees who came during the seventies of the twentieth century, particularly after 1971, were equally the peasants and the cultivators and also under the scheduled caste category. In the pre-independent period, no significant change in the agricultural field was found in the region due to the availability of land. However, it was after the infiltration of the huge number of landless cultivators and the establishment of their settlements over the whole of the northern region, that made a significant change to take place concerning the quality and quantity of the production. At the same time, pressure on land increased phenomenally.²⁷ The migrant peasants brought almost all the cultivable as well as barren, fallow land under cultivation. They applied modern agricultural technology viz. chemical fertilizers pesticide, high yielding seeds, proper irrigation. They grabbed the opportunities of agricultural loans granted to the peasants by the State and Central Government. As a result, within a short period, a radical change took place so far as agricultural production is concerned. The production underwent a revolutionary change that had ever taken place in the region.

Consequently, the lands inhabited by Namasudra refugee peasants viz Kharibari, Batasi, Phansideoa, Dhupguri, Haldibari, and many others soon began to supply the demands of almost the whole of urban areas of the North Bengal. On the other hand, the Rajbansi peasants, though depending entirely on land, did not utilize the opportunities provided by the Government. Therefore among the two communities of the scheduled caste category, both of whom were land-dependent, a disparity regarding the economic condition arose within a concise period.

After Independence and the partition in 1947, the situation became different. The history of the partition is not only about the division of British India into two independent nations of India and Pakistan. It had severe impacts on national politics and nations.

Like other parts of West Bengal, in the North Bengal, the Government was busy giving priority to the cause of rehabilitation of the refugees, which became a burning issue to the then Government of both State and Centre.²⁸ Therefore most of the vested lands were distributed to those landless refugees. The Rajbansi *Jotedars* did not give education to their offspring, nor did they engage themselves in any other occupations. Therefore, they had to face unprecedented miseries. Swaraj Basu observes, 'this change in the ethnic composition of the landholding class in North Bengal was also related to a general change in the character of the North Bengal economy itself.'²⁹ One of the significant effects of this change was that the Rajbansis, who once dominated the local society and economy, were gradually

subordinated by the newly settled dominant upper caste gentry. This domination of essential immigrant gentry, as well as the cultural differences between them and the Rajbansis, created a sense of community solidarity among the latter. The most articulate section among the Rajbansis, the elites, played an important role to whip up this community consciousness in order to mobilize the members of their caste for the collective mobility.

VI Political empowerment

The legacy of PanchananBarma and Guruchand Thakur was carried forward by their disciples Nagendra Narayan Roy and Jogendranath Mandal, respectively. Jogendranath Mandal actively involved himself with the activities of the 'Little Brothers of the Poor', a social welfare organization. He contested the 1937 Bengal Legislative Assembly election for the Bakarganj North-East General Rural Constituency and won over Saral Kumar Dutta, the apparent heir of Aswani Kumar Dutta. After his election to the Legislature, he became the Minister of Law and Labor in undivided Pakistan. After that, Mandal worked tirelessly for the upliftment of the scheduled caste, especially the Namasudras, because they were the greatest in number, and they already got themselves united under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur.

Subsequently, Mandal developed a political connection with Dr. Ambedkar and joined with Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation. JogendranathMandal invited Ambedkar to come to Bengal and wholeheartedly supported him to enter in the Constituent Assembly in 1946, although Sardar Ballabh Bhai Patel tried his best to resist the entry of Ambedkar in the Constituent Assembly from anywhere in India. Patel's claim was toughly challenged by Mandal, who played a pivotal role for the cause of whole Dalits of India and by assuring the votes of the seven MLA belonging to Namasudra, Rajbansi and fisherman communities. The name of Ambedkar was proposed by Jogendranath Mandal and seconded by the Rangpur MLA Nagendra Narayan Ray; Tangail MLA Gayanath Biswas, Faridpur MLA Dwarikanath Baruri, Jessore MLA Bholanath Biswas, Pabna MLA Haran Chandra Barman, and Mukunda Behari Mullick voted for Ambedkar. Thus he owns seven votes, whereas he required only five votes in his favour. Probably it is not difficult to realize that Thakur PanchananBarma and Guruchand Thakur had already paved the way for Ambedkar. So today's constitutional safeguard and various upliftment projects for the Dalits of the whole country all owe indirectly to Thankur Panchanan Barma and Guruchand Thakur.

Guruchand's emphasis on the political power is conspicuous in his statement '*je jatir raja nai, se jati taja noi*' (the community without a king of its own is not a lively one). The political influence of Roy Saheb Panchanan Barma is mentioned by Nripendranath Pal, From 1926 to 1929 was not in the Bengal Legislative Council. Nagendra Narayan Ray kept a strict vigil so that the Amendment Bill is passed after Panchanan's recommendation.³⁰

VII Status of the Namasudras after 1947

The organized Namasudra movement disappeared from the public space in West Bengal after 1947 because of the pressures of partition politics, communal mobilization, violence, and displacement, which forced them to align with the mainstream political parties like the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha. They were divided on the partition issue before 1947, and this certainly affected their identity politics. After the riots of 1950, as they migrated to West Bengal, their distinctive Namasudra identity was absorbed into a border 'refugee' identity. In post-Partition India, the refugee came to constitute a new community united by a shared past of displacement. However, as Nilanjana Chatterjee has pointed out, 'while the plasticity of the signifier of the 'refugee' meant that different ideas and identities could be expressed through it, it also served to mask, manage and unify the diversity of the displaced.'³¹

The history of migration and demand for citizenship and rehabilitation proved to be a persistent feature of Namasudra's existence since 1947, and it became even more critical after 1971 when the Bangladesh war led to more Namasudra migration from the east. Their social and emotional needs explain the re-emergence of MatuaMahasangha in the 1980s. Namasudras struggle for resettlement acquired a new dimension when the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2003 denied Indian citizenship to those who arrived after 1971. The articulation of their political power in 2010 was a desperate response to this contingency. The past of the Namasudras in east Bengal, their history of displacement, and their search for citizenship thus continue to define the parameters of Namasudra politics in west Bengal even to date.³²

In Bengal, the migration of refugees took place in waves, not as movements of large bodies of the population as in Punjab. The first wave of refugees mainly consisted of the more wealthy classes, mostly high caste Hindu gentry and the educated middle classes with jobs, including many of the Namasudra middle classes as well, who could sell or arrange the exchange of properties.³³ Very few Namasudra peasants migrated at this stage or could afford to move, because migration required resources which they lacked.

VIII Societal transformation after 1980's

Although many Namasudras have been dispersed across the subcontinent, those who remained in West Bengal have surged ahead since the 1980s. Instead of business and enterprise, they chose the path of education and secured profession, a path that had been prescribed by Guruchand.³⁴ Astonishingly, by 2001 the literacy rate among the Namasudras in West Bengal reached 71.93 percent, which is even ahead of the provincial average of 68.64 percent. In terms of their occupational structure, 21.4 percent were landowning peasants, 16.9 percent agricultural laborers, and 61.7 percent were in the various other professions.³⁵ Many of them have been indeed well placed in various white-collar occupations.³⁶ This indicates that they had come a long way since the 1950s when they were

struggling as rootless refugees for survival and rehabilitation. While in West Bengal, Orissa, and Assam the Namasudras enjoy the status of SCs, they do not enjoy a similar status in other provinces where they have settled down after the partition. In 2007, when the Indian Parliament expand the list in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi, their demand was turned down on the ground that they would not suffer anymore from 'extreme social, educational and economic backwardness', in these provinces.³⁷

However, despite their educational and social progress, the Namasudra middle class has remained politically marginal in a province where political power even today is monopolized by high caste 'Hindu Bhadrak' i.e. the elite. Under the circumstances, they come to constitute counter elite who remained torn between multiple identities.

The Namasudra counter elite, without a political base, drifted from one political party to the other for support. They shifted their 'loyalties' from the Left to the Congress, but sometimes their anti-Muslim tirades even betrayed an affinity of sentiments with the right-wing Hindu nationalists. On the other hand, there were also 'radicals' who considered the union between the Dalits and the Muslims as a counterforce against the caste dominated mainstream politics of India.³⁸ In other words, the educated urban Namasudras, haunted by their east Bengali past and detached from their brethren in the border districts, struggled to find a distinctive location themselves within the new and continually shifting paradigms of West Bengal politics. It ultimately required the leadership of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, Guruchand's grandson, to find a new symbolic site where the Namasudra elites and the masses could again be united to reclaim their distinctive collective self.

The Matua Mahasangha was registered in 1988 as a socio-religious organization whose motto was to propagate the religious messages of Harichand and Guruchand. It, therefore, meant a symbolic return to the two iconic figures who represented the point of origin of the Namasudra social identity and their history of self-assertion. As it once happened in the nineteenth century, the *gosain* and *pagols* - the traditional preachers of the sect - once again toured the Namasudra and Dalit villages, organized *shatisabhas* (religious meetings), sang Matua devotional songs and spread the messages of Hari-Guruchand through *Harijatra* and *Palagan*. These days Matua Mahasangha takes recourse to more modern methods of producing CDs of Matua devotional songs and publishing booklets to disseminate the teaching of the gurus. Thakurnagar has become the spiritual center of this new religious movement, as millions of Matua devotees visit this place every year on the occasion of the *Barunimela* in March (a festival that was once celebrated in Orakandi to make the birth anniversary of Hrichand).

In terms of its religious philosophy, the Matua Mahasangha remains within the perimeters of the two texts, which codified and textualized the teachings of the gurus, Sree Sree Harililamrita and Sree Sree Guruchand Charit,³⁹ as the Matua Mahasangha constitution enjoins all its members to accept these texts as the most authentic representation of the guru's messages. These texts cannot be 'changed, enlarged, added to or revised'.⁴⁰ Thus Matua has now seemingly become a religion of the book. The Vaishnava origin of his movement is now 'forgotten,' and it is claimed to be a 'new' protestant religion that repudiates Vedic rituals and Brahmanism. According to its constitution, the professed goal of the

MatuaMahasangha is to bring salvation to the downtrodden through a 'religion-based modernity', which would mean not just spiritual salvation, but overcoming the 'natural, social and the psychological barriers' that hinder the process of the oppressed. It is thus presented as a reformist religion that proposes to fight against casteism and superstitions, as well as social and economic backwardness. True to the universalism, of the gurus, its membership remains open to everyone, irrespective of caste, religion or gender, and all members enjoy the same right within the organization

IX Concluding remark

However, today the prestigious place in the social hierarchy and financial soundness of many of the downtrodden and the underprivileged sections of the society as well as Dalits - all owe to many responsible leaders like Thakur Panchanan Barma, Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur who have carried forward the movement for upliftment or entire development of their society as well as other backward castes.

Reference

¹Anderson, W.A., Parker, F. B. (1965) 'Society: Its Organization and Operation', *Social Forces*, Volume 43, Issue 3, 01 March 1965, pp. 444-5.

²Ibid.

³Bandhayapadhaya, Sekhar (1990) *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*, Kolkata:K.P. Bagchi and Company,p.64.

⁴De, Barun (1993) 'Introduction: A Mirror Cracked From Side to Side Colonialism, Class, Caste, Communalism'in Bandhayapadhaya, Sekhar & Das, Suranjan (ed.), *Caste and Communal Politics in South Asia*, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Company,p.2.

⁵Omvedt, Gail (1994) *Dalits and The Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and The Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage Publication, p.269.

⁶De, Barun (1993) 'Introduction: A Mirror Cracked From Side to Side Colonialism, Class, Caste, Communalism' in Bandhayapadhaya, Sekhar & Das, Suranjan (ed.), *Caste and Communal Politics in South Asia*, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Company,p.3.

⁷WBSA, G.B. Appoint (Reforms), File No.IR-2 of 1933 April, 1954 Progs. Nos. 9-61, Serial No. 50.

⁸Barman, Upendra Nath (1922) *Thakur Panchanan Barmar Jiban Charit*, Jalpaiguri, 1387 B.S., p.77;

⁹Dasgupta, Ranjit (1922) *'Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal; Jalpaiguri 1869-1947'*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1922, p.145.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹Dutta, Papiya (2011) 'Swadhinata-Uttar Uttarbanger A-BarnaSamajerRupantarChitra: Sanghat 0 Dwandwa 1947-1977' (in Bengali) in *Itihas Anusandhan*, No. 25, Kolkata: Paschimanga Itihas Samsad, p.461.

¹²Ghosh, Ananda Gopal (1991) Uttarakhand Andoloner Oitihāsik Prekshapat in Mamhmud, A.W., *Itihas Anusandhan-05*,Paschim Banga Itihas samsad, Kolkata,p.110.

¹³Dutta, Papiya (2011) 'Swadhinata-Uttar Uttarbanger A-BarnaSamajerRupantarChitra: Sanghat 0 Dwandwa 1947-1977' (in Bengali) in *Itihas Anusandhan*, No. 25, Kolkata: Paschimanga Itihas Samsad, p.304.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵Ghosh Bhattacharyya, Moumita (2009) Rajbanshis: The Deprived People of North Bengal (In the State of West Bengal), *International Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol.2,(July-December, 2009), pp. 242-77.

- ¹⁶Sanyal ,C.C. (1964) Chatrader Prati (Pamphlet),published from Jalpaiguri, pp.1-3.
- ¹⁷Dutta, Papiya (2011) '*Caste, Society and Politics of North Bengal, 1869-1977*', Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, North Bengal University, p.297.
- ¹⁸WBSA, Home (Political Department), Confidential Files, 1947, File No. 149/47 coll-2,progs.No.1-9.
- ¹⁹Adhikari, Madhab Chandra, (2015). *Identity Crisis: A Study of the Rajbanshis of North-Eastern India (1891-1979)*, New Delhi: Aayu Publications, p.270.
- ²⁰ Poddar, Arabinda, (2000). 'Udbastu Srot 0 Paschimbanglar Janajiban' In Swapan Basu, Harsha Dutta (ed.)'*Bish Shataker Bangali Jiban 0 Samskriti*', Adhyapak Shankari Prasad Basu Sammanona (felicitation) Grantha, Kolkata, p.176-7.
- ²¹Editorial Note (2011) *Trisota, A bengali weekly newspaper, published from Jalpaiguri, Dated-06.01.1957, cited in Papiya Dutta, 'Caste, Society and Politics of North Bengal, 1869-1977', Unpublished Ph.D.Thesis, North Bengal University, 2011, p.297.*
- ²²Ghosh, Ananda Gopal, (1999) '*Upendra Nath Barman 0 Tatkalin Uttarbanger Samaj 0 Rajniti*' , in Bengali in *Uttarer Haoya*, Pratham Barsha, Sankshya-18, (8 May 1999), p.3.
- ²³ Dinesh Dakua (2005) *Uttarer Galpa*, Kolkata, 2005, p.3.
- ²⁴ Ibid., pp25-6
- ²⁵Das, Arjun (2007) '*Kamtapur Movement: A Study under Historical and Media Perspective*' in Dr. ShailenDebnath (ed.) *Social and Political Tensions in North Bengal since 1947*, Siliguri: N. L. Publisher, p.194-5.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷Samaddar, Biman,(2003) '*Udbastu 0 Sarkar: PrasangaPaschimbangla*' in *Paschimbanga: Fire Dakha*, (Bengali) ed. by Rahul Roy, Kolkata, p.198.
- ²⁸ WBSA, Home (Political), Political Department, Confidential Files December,1947, File No.149/47.
- ²⁹Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste*, pp. 52-5.
- ³⁰Singh, Kshetranath (2015) *Rai Sahib Panchanan Barman Jiboni 0 Rangpur Kshatriya SamitirItihas*, Kolkata: Anima Prakasani, p.12.
- ³¹Chatterjee, Nilanjana (1992)'*Midnight's unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation*', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Brown University, p.122.
- ³²Bandhayapadhaya, Sekhar (1990) '*Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*', Kolkata: K. P. Bagchiand Company,p.249.
- ³³Chatterjee, Nilanjana (1990) '*The East Bengal Refugee: A lesion in Survive*', in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed) *Calcutta: The Living City*,Vol.2, Calcutta,p.72.
- ³⁴Bandhayapadhaya, Sekhar (1990) *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*, Kolkata: K.P. Bagchi and Company, p.262.
- ³⁵Ibid, p.262.
- ³⁶Ibid, pp. 258-61.
- ³⁷ Inclusion of Namasudra Community in SC list, Government of India, Press Information Bureau, Press Release, 22 December 2008, Cited in Bandhayapadhaya, *Caste, Politics*, p.263.
- ³⁸Bandhayapadhaya, Sekhar (1990) *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*, Kolkata: K.P. Bagchi and Company, p.263.
- ³⁹Sarkar, Tarak Chandra (1943), '*Sree Sree Harililamrita*', Faridpur, 1323 B.S.; Mahananda Halddar, *Sree Sree Guuchand Charit*, Calcutta,pp.35.
- ⁴⁰*Matua Mahasangha Sangbidhanba Granthantra*, Thakurnagar, 2004, pp. 5-26.