CHAPTER VI

KAMASUJRA MOVEMENT II: 1905 - 1911
On 4 July 1905, it became publicly known from the Secretary of State's statement in the House of Commons, that the final sanction had been given to the long debated scheme of partitioning Bengal. Four days later the Government Resolution was published in the Calcutta papers. Early in August, Congress in Calcutta called for the boycott of English piece goods and other imported articles and advocated the use of their swadeshi substitutes. The movement rapidly gained sympathy of the educated community all over Bengal. And soon the zamindars took it up and through their naibs and peons, began to forbid the use of European goods by their raiyats.1

But still the main problem before the swadeshi leaders was regarding the mobilization of the masses. And by the end of 1906, the agitation began to lose much of its vitality, not merely because the masses did not respond to the solicitations of the agitators,2 but also because they were now resisting

1. 'Summary of Position drawn up by Inspector General of Police, Bengal'; also private telegram from the Viceroy to the Secretary of State, Home (Public), GI, A June 1906, Progs. Nos.169-186, Notes.

the pressures more sturdily than they were able to do at first. During these early years of the swadeshi movement, apart from some occasional attempts to mobilize the Hindu masses, the main attention of the leaders focused on the problem of mobilizing the Muslims, who were by now more or less convinced that "the Partition would be a boon to them and that their special difficulties would receive greater attention from the new administration." The government at this time, was also primarily preoccupied with the task of ensuring the loyalty of this particular section of the population of Eastern Bengal. None of them, however, seem to have been sufficiently aware of the fact that the Namasudras were also thinking on the same line. In 1905, on behalf of the Dacca Namasudra Melaishini

3. P.C. Lyon, Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, No. 133-T, 23 November 1906, Home (Public), GI, A December 1906, Prog. No. 311.

4. P.C. Lyon to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, No. 935-T.C., 21 February 1906, Home (Public), GI, A June 1906, Prog. No. 1/7.


Samiti, Nagarbasi Mazumder and Raghunath Sarkar met Sir Bampfylde Fuller, the Lieutenant Governor of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. They apprised him of the socio-economic condition of the Namasudra community and demanded similar political rights as the Muslims. Later Sashi Bhusan Thakur, the eldest son of Guruchand, made contacts with Nawab Salimullah of Dacca and together they decided that the Muslims and the Namasudras would not support the movement against partition and jointly they would offer resistance to any move for its annulment. This political attitude later on became clearly discernible in a number of Namasudra resolutions adopted in course of the year 1906. One such resolution, unanimously adopted towards the end of the year, stated that it was "simply owing to the dislike and hatred of the Brahmins, the Vaidyas and the Kayasthas that this vast Namasudra community has remained backward; this community has, therefore,


not the least sympathy with them and their agitation, and 
will henceforth work hand in hand with their Mahomedan brethren." 
In another such resolution passed at a meeting held at Orakandi 
in Faridpur on 2 October 1906, they expressed their gratitude 
to the Secretary of State"for his declaring the partition of 
Bengal as a settled fact and admissible of no amendment." 
The motivation behind such unequivocal support for one of the 
most criticized policies of the British government can easily 
be detected from another resolution, passed around the same time 
in a similar meeting which prayed "most earnestly that the Hon'ble 
Mr. Hare will bestow the same rights and privileges upon the 
Namasudras as have been done upon the Mahomedans, in as much as 
the Namasudras and the Mahomedans are the predominating 
communities of Eastern Bengal .......

In this political behaviour of the Namasudras 
during the early years of the swadeshi movement, we can, 
therefore, identify two basic features - alignment with 
the Muslims and loyalty to the British. Material 
calculations no doubt prompted such a course of action. 
But apart from this, there were certain other sentiments 
and influences involved as well. We learn from a poem

10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
'Musulman', published in Pataka in 1917, that the alliance between the Muslims and the Namasudras was viewed as a union of two outcaste peasant communities equally despised and exploited by the high caste Hindu gentry. And this served as an adequate justification for their decision of offering a joint resistance to a movement which was led and supported by such high caste Hindu landlords and expressing in no uncertain terms their loyalty to the British government.

The events of 1906, however, made the nationalist leadership aware of the situation and conscious of the fact that unless they could mobilize this large agrarian caste, their movement had little chance of success. This prompted them to undertake a series of attempts to secure their support, sometimes through persuasion and sometimes through use of force, as social ostracism which had become a very handy method of forcing reluctant people to observe swadeshi had no effect on an untouchable caste having no social rights whatsoever.

In Farijpur, in early 1907, Ambika Charan Hazumder, the foremost among the swadeshi leaders of that district, visited different places in the Hadapsur sub-division, one of the principal Namasudra areas and held a number of

12. The poem was reprinted in Raicharan Biswas, Jatiya Jagaran /In Bengali/, (Calcutta, 1921), pp.72-76.
boycott meetings, which were reported to have been "fairly successful". In continuation of these initial efforts, the draft resolution of the proposed Faridpur District Conference, which was scheduled to commence on 13 July 1907, tried to make political use of an old grievance of the Kamasudras against their being employed as scavengers in jails. The sixth resolution ran as follows:

"That this conference strongly protests against the degrading treatment to which Kamasudras as a class are wrongly subjected in the jails, and which is not only highly repugnant to their feelings, but also acts as a social stigma upon their caste and this conference strongly urges that regular sweepers should be provided for serving the jail population."

But the conference itself was prohibited by the magistrate of Faridpur under Section 3 of the Public Meetings Ordinance of 1907, when the promoters refused to delete

13. 'Fortnightly Report on the agitation in Eastern Bengal and Assam.' [Hereafter, Fortnightly Report] for the period ending 16 June 1907, Home (Political), GI, A July 1907, Prog. No.188.

14. Telegram, from the magistrate of Faridpur to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 5 July 1907, Home (political), GI, E July 1907, Prog. No.197.
certain other 'objectionable' parts of the resolution as suggested by the government. On this occasion, however, the Faridpur District Association had come into existence with Ambika Nazumder as the President. In the second half of September, on the eve of the pujas, the Association circulated a printed letter calling upon shopkeepers to refrain from importing foreign goods for the pujas. At the same time Nazumder undertook an extensive tour through the south of the district, advocating purchase of only country goods for the Durga Puja, although to avoid government interference he made no mention of 'boycott'. The political significance of this particular tour can be assessed properly if we bear in mind the demographic composition of southern Faridpur, where most of the local Jamacdrus lived in the swamp areas.

15. Extract from a telegram, 14 July 1907, from the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam to Govt. of India, Home (Political), GI, 3 July 1907, Prog. No.196.


17. Fortnightly Report upto the close of September 1907, Home (Political), GI, A November 1907, Prog.No.15.

18. Telegram from the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, 26 September 1907, Home (Political), GI, 3 October 1907, Prog. No.31.
Apart from such direct method of approach through political meetings, the Faridpur District Association took recourse to other means which the government described as "a species of bribery" by which it tried to gain an influence over villages where the swadeshi spirit had not a spontaneous and independent existence.\textsuperscript{19} As an example, the case of the Dhalgram national school may be cited. In the village of Dhalgram, "inhabited almost entirely by Namasudras," a school was run in the house of a well-to-do member of the same caste with 37 pupils coming from the same community. In 1906, the school house being in a dilapidated condition, the Namasudras asked their landlords Chandra Silash and Kunja Uilash Mukherjee for assistance, which was promised, provided they would take the swadeshi vow. Having no other resort, the villagers agreed to oblige and the school was saved. Later, when the Faridpur District Association was trying to gain control over primary education in the district, the school received a monthly grant of Rs.2/-, on condition that the students would continue to take the vow.\textsuperscript{20}


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
In Hakurganj, Aswini Kumar Dutta and his Swadesh Bandhab Samiti were making similar efforts to enlist the support of the Kamasudras in the agitation. Village samitis were formed to mobilize the villagers and teach them the principles of self-help and self-government. For this purpose, arbitration samitis were started which decided their cases and suits and curtailed their legal expenses. One such samiti is said to have operated successfully during the second year of the swadeshi movement in village Furscher inhabited by the Kamasudras who were thus saved from "the dreadful jaws of litigation". The villagers are said to have given up registering their documents and instead began to execute documents by putting thumb impressions in the presence of five manais of the village. And if anybody denied the execution of the document, he was subjected to social discipline and punished.\(^{21}\)

Apart from this, in the following year the Swadesh Bandhab Samiti, through its rural branches, "made the most sustained and vigorous effort to enmesh the Muhammadan peasantry and the Kamasudras in its net". They were induced to attend meetings and were promised social

\(^{21}\) History of the second year of the Swadeshi movement, (22nd Sraban, 1313-1314 B.S.), 'Supplementary Report on the Samitis in the Dacca Division, Eastern Bengal and Assam', Home (Political), GI, Deposit, July 1903, No.13.
and other favours if they participated in the swadeshi
movement. For this purpose, leaders like Aswini Dutta,
Satish Chandra Chatterjee and other volunteers like
Nishi Santa Bose and Sris Chandra Ray, went round the
interior of the district, delivering speeches which the
government considered as of "the most objectionable
character." The most important of such tours was perhaps
the one undertaken by Aswini Dutta himself in Sarupkati
and Jhalakati police stations in the rains of 1907,
around the middle of June. He visited places like
Hasiani, Sarangal, Kaukhali, Julubar and Nazipur, addressed
largely attended meetings, had close talks with the Muslim
and Namasudra peasants, persuaded them to use swadeshi
goods and boycott English courts. Simultaneously with
this, rumours were systematically spread in these areas
that the oppressive "Assam laws" were going to be introduced
soon, that the government would take over all lands, now

22. 'Report on Samitis in the Dacca Division, Eastern
Bengal and Assam, 1903', Home (Political), GI,
Deposit, April 1909, No.2.

23. Diary of the Superintendent of Police, Sakarganj, for
week ending 15 June 1907, Home (Political), GI, A
August 1907, Prog. No.106; Copy of Diary from the
Superintendent of Police, Sakarganj, for the week
ending 22 June 1907, Home (Political), GI, A August
1907, Prog. No.106.
taxes would be imposed on coconut and date trees, as well as on betel nut and plantain trees. Hindu widows would be forced to remarry, and above all, people in large numbers would be packed off to Assam to serve as tea garden coolies. Political demonstrations also continued in the predominantly Namasudra areas such as the Gaurnadi thana. Along with this, pamphlets were also published, such as *Swadeshi Sangsat*, which stated that "the English mix the fat of the cow and the pig with salt" and "the bone of the cow" with sugar.

In the district of Dacca, however, the poor Namasudras were subjected to intimidation and coercion when found buying foreign goods during the puja holidays.

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24. Confidential Diary of the Superintendent of Police, Bakarganj, for the week ending 29 June 1907, Home (Political), GI, A August 1907, Prog. No. 108.

25. Confidential Diary of the Superintendent of Police, Bakarganj, for the week ending 6 July 1907, Home (Political), GI, A August 1907, Prog. No.110.

26. Fortnightly Report for the second half of October 1907, Home (Political), GI, A January 1908, Prog. No.50.

27. 'Weekly Report of the Director of Criminal Intelligence,' [hereafter, Weekly Report], 8 January 1908, Home (Political), GI, D January 1908, Prog. No.115.

28. Fortnightly Report for the first half of October 1907, Home (Political), GI, A November 1907, Prog.No.18.
A particularly flagrant instance of this occurred at Sholla, where in late October 1907, a party of young men visited the quarter inhabited by the Namasudras in a boat and conducted a series of door to door search with a view to seeing that no foreign goods were used. In one instance they are said to have offered to strip a woman of the cloth she was wearing on the ground that it was foreign. Generally their proceedings were so violent that three distinct prosecutions were initiated by the persons manhandled. But it is reported, that as the accused were chiefly young men of good birth and influence, the complainants were induced to withdraw most of their charges. The government feared that the prosecution might prove pointless except perhaps in the case of some of the minor offenders. And this was precisely what was to happen. In spite of the efforts of the government, only two persons could be sentenced to four months' imprisonment and the attempts to enforce the boycott by coercive means went on unabated.

In fact, such coercion had become a common practice in a wide area of Eastern Bengal, particularly in districts like Bakarganj, Faridpur and Mymensingh where Hindu zamindars

29. Fortnightly Report for the second half of October 1907, Home (Political), CI, A January 1908, Prog. No. 50.

30. Fortnightly Report for the first half of November 1907, Home (Political), CI, A January 1908, Prog. No. 52.
were strictly prohibiting the sale and use of foreign piece goods in their respective zamindaries "on pain of heavy fine or sound shoe-beating".31

The Namasudra leaders like Guruchand, his son Sashi Dhusan and their associates were also active in counteracting such nationalist attempts. They assiduously tried to dissuade their caste people from joining the boycott movement on the ground 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 rich people for furthering their own self-interest and the poor peasants had no interests involved in it. The Partition would not affect the Namasudras, while its withdrawal would not bring any special benefit to them. On the contrary, the Namasudras might profit from the loyalty to the foreign rulers 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 of their cheapness. Those nationalist leaders, as Guruchand emphasized, who were now

31. Fortnightly Report for the second half of November 1907, Home (Political), GI, A January 1908, Prog.No.53.
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 Brahmans and the Kayasthas. For a long time, the Namasudras had been the outcastes of the society. So only when they would be given a place of honour, they would come forward with full vigour to serve the country. Hence, if the nationalists really wanted the Namasudras to support their political movement, they should first wage a battle to obliterate social inequalities, which they were not prepared to do.  

The identification of the swadeshi movement with the high caste Hindu zamindars, whom the Namasudra peasants thoroughly hated, was quite natural. Many of the leaders had zamindaries in areas where Namasudras mainly served as tenants. Ambika Mazumder had a zamindary in the swamp areas of Rajair in the Madaripur thana of Faridpur, district, while Aswini Dutta's estate was in Batajore in


Bakarganj, where Namasudras mainly served as barga tenants. Apart from these top leaders, if we look at the composition of the National Volunteers during this time, we will find that almost all of them were either doctors or pleaders or else, sons of Hindu zamindars and their peons and lathials. In Namasudra majority areas, like Sarupkati, "nearly half the volunteers are said to be talukdars". Almost all the samitis and associations, run in such areas of north and west Bakarganj, were patronised by high caste Hindu bhadraloks, the majority of whom were either zamindars, talukdars, or howladars. The Dacca Anusilan Samiti had a similar high caste Hindu bhadralok orientation, although


35. 'Memorandum on the National Volunteer Movement, Bengal and Eastern Bengal and Assam', by C.J. Stevenson Moore, 11 September 1907, Home (Political), GI, Deposit, October 1907, No.19.

36. Revised list of Societies, Sabhas and Anjumans in Bakarganj District, under Circular No.8 S.B., 20 July 1903, prepared by J.C. Bhauvik, Inspector of Police, Criminal Investigation Department, in the 'Report on Samitis in Dacca Division, Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1908', Home (Political), GI, Deposit, April 1909, No.2.
later on, a few low caste persons were also inducted. In Bakarganj, it is often alleged that the leaders of the Swadesh Bandhab Samiti, like Aswini Dutta, Upendra Nath Sen and others were "specially active in using their powers as landlord" to organise boycott and discontent. Similar allegations, as we have seen earlier, were common in other districts as well, particularly in Dacca, Faridpur and Mymensingh.

Thus, in the Namasudra payche the anti-partition agitation came to be increasingly associated with the high caste Hindu gentry with whom they had no identity of interest. The Government, on the other hand, was giving concessions in which the aspirations of a socially ambitious untouchable caste found possibilities of fulfilment. The Resolution of the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, in February 1907, that its employees would be henceforth recruited on the basis of the proportional numerical strength of the various communities, Muslims particularly, but the depressed Hindu castes not excluded, raised new hopes in the minds of the educated Namasudras about further social and


38. 'Report on Samitis in Dacca Division, Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1908', op.cit.,
material advancement. Such admittance to the public service was regarded by them as "their first chance of rising in public estimations." 39

To take fullest advantage of such provisions, the educated Namasudras in 1907, under the advice of Mead, decided to organise a delegation to Sir Lancelot Hare, the then Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Mead fixed up the appointment and the delegation, headed by Guruchand himself, included five of his close associates, Bhishmadev Das, Sashi Bhusan Thakur, Dr. Tarini Charan Bala, Radhamohan Biswas and Purna Chandra Mullick. From the October 1907 issue of their journal Namasaudra Suhrid, we learn that the delegation had met the Lieutenant Governor and prayed that the British Government in India might remain for ever. They made him aware of the social injustices perpetrated on them, the development of education within their hitherto ignorant community and the necessity of appointing them in increasing numbers in public services in order to help them end the social stigma attached

to their caste for centuries. Interestingly, immediately after this meeting Sashi Bhushan was appointed a sub-Registrar, Dr. Tarini Charan Bala, a government doctor and sometimes later in early 1908, Kumud Behari Mullick, a Deputy Magistrate. And all these appointments were regarded by the Namasudras as symbols of recognition of their caste by the ruling authorities - a recognition totally absent in the pre-British days and which, they believed, would ensure better treatment from local Hindu society as well.

In the field of education also, the Namasudras were being assisted by the Government whenever approached. Orakandi High School was established in 1908 and was initially maintained by subscriptions collected from the members of the Namasudra community. But Mead appealed to the Director of Public Instruction for funds and the application being recommended by the Commissioner of Faridpur himself, the


school immediately received a monthly grant of Rs. 75/-.

The establishment of this school really marked the beginning of greater diffusion of education among the ignorant Namasudra masses and the financial assistance it received made them more strongly attached to the missionaries and their patron, the British government. The nationalists could not offer any concrete programme for the upliftment of the social and economic status of the Namasudras to counteract such moves.

The endeavours of the Namasudra leadership, supported adequately by the government, therefore, led to the expected political results. In Faridpur, the political speeches of Ambika Mazumder advocating the use of swadeshi goods seem to have had little effect on the Namasudra peasantry and the Dhalgram National School was soon "reported to be defunct." In Bakarganj, the peasants in general, both lower caste Hindus and Muslims, had become indifferent and regarded the anti-government agitation merely

44. "Report on the National Schools in the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam (From 1 October 1908 to 30 June 1909)", Home (Political), GI, A March 1911, Prog. No. 5.
as "something that the Babus are doing." In areas with major Namasudra concentration, like Pirojpur, Liverpool salt was being freely sold. And where they faced obstruction, such as in Goila in Gaurnadi thana, the Namasudra peasants decided to set up a hat of their own, as they could not get British goods as freely as they wished. Such anti-swadeshi sentiments had taken over their counterparts in the neighbouring districts of Jessore and Khulna as well. In April 1908, two meetings consisting of 700 to 800 Muslims and Namasudras were held in Jessore in order to counteract the efforts of the swadeshis and a notice was circulated, threatening to burn the houses of those who would not use foreign articles.

In these areas, however, the anti-swadeshi zeal had also taken the shape of a militant social protest, resulting in a good deal of communal tension. At a meeting

46. Resume of affairs in Bakarganj for 1907, Home (Political), GJ, A April 1908, Prog. No.24.

47. Confidential Diary of the Superintendent of Police, Bakarganj, for week ending 6 July 1907, op.cit.

48. Diary of Mr. Hughes - Buller, District Magistrate of Bakarganj, for the month of January 1908, Home (Political), GJ, A April 1908, Prog. No.24.

49. Weekly Report, 11 April 1908, Home (Political), GJ, 5 May 1908, Prog. No.38.
of about 1000 Namasudras held at Narail, in Jessore, in September 1907, it was decided that they should not serve the higher classes of Hindus. Once again in May 1908, in the neighbouring district of Khulna, the Namasudras and the Muslims combined against the higher caste Hindus in a dispute over the performance of a religious ceremony in village Tilak, about 5 or 6 miles south-east of Khulna. The quarrel arose between the Namasudras on one side and the Brahmans and Kayasthas on the other, over the right to perform Bhawani puja (or Kalipuja) under a particular tree. The local Muslim residents used to assert right over the land on which stood the thakurbari and every year claimed a share of the immense quantity of sugar and other offerings made to the goddess. This apportionment between the Hindus and the Muslims usually led to some bickerings. But in 1908, a special occasion for a dispute arose, when the high caste Hindus fixed the date of the puja for the 10th Jaishtha, and the Namasudras, incited by Muslims, decided to perform it on the 6th Jaishtha, with their own Chandal Brahman who would enter the mandap or rostrum erected for this purpose. The Brahmans and the Kayasthas resented this and objected to the plan. This infuriated the Namasudras who combined together to carry through the plan and called the members of their caste, not only from their own district, but from neighbouring Jessore and Faridpur as well. The high caste Hindus, fearing

50. Weekly Report, 21 September 1907, Home (Political), CI, B October 1907, Prog. No. 47.
breach of peace, moved the district administration to issue an injunction prohibiting the puja. And the attempt to enforce this injunction led to a violent clash. The Muslims sided with the Namasudras and the combined mob, armed with spears, shields and lathis, assaulted the Sub-Inspector and the constables who had been deputed to keep the peace. The mob numbered from 5 to 8 thousands, and they even defied the District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police, and did not disperse till shots were fired on them and the armed police appeared on the scene. About 120 men including Namasudras and Muslims were later convicted of rioting and punitive police were posted in the area for one year.

The nationalists seem to have been aware of the developments and sufficiently conscious about the necessity of doing something. And, therefore, to salvage the situation, in 1908 they made renewed attempts to mobilize this community and the eighteenth resolution of the Bengal Provincial Conference held at Pabna in February, spoke of giving "social privileges to the Namasudras, such as use of barbers, washermen and bearers". In continuation of this initial

51. Husselman, 29 May 1903.
52. G.S. Dutt, Magistrate of Khulna, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No.929J - xiii-14, 5 June 1911, Political (Police), GE, File No.P3R-1, 2 July 1911, Progs. Nos.325-328.
Two meetings were held in the district of Jardirpur on the 1st and 2nd March. The first meeting was attended by three to four thousand people, including Muslims and Namasudras, as well as other Hindus. The first speaker, G.G. Pattadar, a pleader from Rajbari, warned that the partition would be followed by the abolition of the permanent settlement and the people would have to pay heavier taxes. To prevent this, was needed a united resistance by all the sections of Indian society. And to achieve such social unity, he asked the Hindus present there to allow social privileges to the Namasudras who had been reluctant to join the agitation of their high caste brethren, out of a sense of social deprivation. Ambika Hazarap, the next speaker, also explained to the Muslims and the Namasudras the advantages of using swadeshi goods and promised the latter that he would have their status raised if they gave up the use of foreign articles. In the second meeting as well, he made similar appeals, which "are reported, however, to have had little effect on the people more particularly addressed."

54. Weekly Report, 21 March 1903, Home (Political), GI, 2 April 1903, Prog. No. 48.

55. Fortnightly Report for the first half of March 1903 Home (Political), GI, 4 April 1903, Prog. No. 107.
Similarly in Bakarganj, the Swadesh Bandhab Samiti through its 159 village branches had been constantly trying to bring the Namasudra peasants into its organisation.56 This particular problem received special attention during the deliberations at the Barishal District Conference held on the 17th, the 18th and the 19th August, 1908. On the second day, Sricharan Sen moved the fifteenth resolution which ran as follows:

"This conference considers it necessary to spread education among the Namasudras whereby to improve their social condition." 57

In moving the resolution, the speaker said that there would be no success in the political arena unless the condition of the Namasudras be improved. The government dismissed the agitation as nothing more than the effort of a few educated men who wished to attain power in the political field. To avoid such stigma, as well as to make the movement more effective, the support of the lower classes had to be secured. For, it was quite impossible to agitate, as Sen argued, without the Namasudras who constituted the only fighting class of people among the Hindus of Bengal.

56. Fortnightly Report for the second half of August 1908, Home (Political), GI, A October 1908, Prog.No.105.

There were twenty three lakhs of them in the district of Bakarganj alone and the Christian missionaries were always after them. In order to neutralize such pernicious influences the Namasudras had to be given some social privileges. They desired to have their clothes washed by the Hindu washermen and Sen could see no reason to deny this. For if the people could claim swaraj to have equal rights and privileges with the Englishmen, why then should the Namasudras not claim this concession? Hence to obtain swaraj, he urged the higher classes of people to make some concessions to the lower classes as well. The resolution was seconded by Purna Chandra De, who went so far as to compare the samurai disturbances in Japan with those of the common classes in India, when he was stopped by the president, Aswini Kumar Dutta. Gaikuntha Nath Mal, one of the few educated Namasudras who attended the conference, also supported the resolution. He explained the present state of his community and said that the dhobis had no reason to refuse their services to the Namasudras who also belonged very much to Hindu society. In addition to this he also pleaded for the assistance of the higher castes for the spread of education among the members of his caste. Two other Namasudras, Mohini Das of Chandshi and Aswini Kumar Halder of Carangal also supported the resolution which was carried without any opposition.58

58. Ibid.
The third day of the meeting was entirely devoted to the question of "improvement and reformation of society." But as it appears from the different speeches delivered on this day, of all social problems the one which monopolised the attention of almost all the speakers was that of the degraded condition of the Namasudras. Surendra Nath Sen of Gaurnadi expressed his views in favour of abolishing the caste system altogether. So long as this was not done, he argued, political success would continue to elude, for it needed brotherly feelings between all classes. Satish Chandra Chatterjee, one of the closest associates of Aswini Dutta, spoke at length about the low social position of the Namasudras and frankly admitted that many of them were anti-swadeshi simply because they were despised by all the sections of Hindu society. Hence in order to secure their political support they had to be given certain social privileges. Initially, as his simple solution was, the barbers had to be persuaded to shave the Namasudras. Sricharan Sen added to this a proposal of securing the services of the washermen as well. Some of the zamindars present in the meeting, like Upendra Nath Sen Mahalanabis of Sasanda, Shubaneswar Roy Chowdhury of Kalashkathi, and Sarada Kumar Roy Chowdhury of Kahematum, promised to see that the barbers and washermen serve the Namasudras in their respective zamindaries.59

It is important to note here, that the list of people who attended the Earisal District Conference on 17-19 August 1908, shows that an overwhelming majority of them belonged to the three Hindu upper castes; but none of them uttered a single word about accepting food and water from the hands of the Namasudras - a social demand articulated by the latter since the early 1870's. Instead they found a handy scapegoat and satisfied their conscience by shifting the responsibility on to the shoulders of the barbers and washermen. Apart from a few hollow promises, neither in the speeches of Ambika Mazumder nor in those delivered at the Earisal District Conference, was there any concrete programme for the social and economic advancement of the Namasudra peasants. Such a lack of serious intention was clearly discernible also in a speech delivered at a Namasudra conference in the middle of 1908 by Bary Sankar Dasgupta, an extremist leader of Bogra. He advised the Namasudras not to quarrel with the higher castes, for such feeling of animosity would make it more difficult for them to attain a higher social status. They should eschew their sectarianism and unite with the rest of the society under the banner of the Indian nation. But what would they receive in return and how they would improve their material condition and social position? His answer to this difficult question was there simple: "Help yourself and God will help you!"

60. Fortnightly Report for the second half of August 1908, op.cit.
61. Pyary Sankar Dasgupta, 'Namasudra', Navyabharat, Agrahayan 1315 B.S.
In fact the Namasudras were helping themselves in the way they considered best suited to their interests. A Namasudra Conference in March 1908, demanded "freedom of trade" and by the summer of that year they were reported to be buying foreign cloth and salt in Farisol, in spite of the fact that sometimes these were even costlier than their swadeshi substitutes. Such active resistance to the swadeshi movement was perhaps to some extent also due to the commutation proceedings under Section 40 of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, which further exacerbated the tensions between the high caste Hindu landlords and their Namasudra tenants.

Produce rent was an exceptional feature of the land-tenure system of Bakarganj. Apart from a few isolated areas in thana Mehendiganj and round Ramrapara, it could only be found extensively in the marshy regions of Gaurnadi police station where large colonies of high caste Hindu bhadraloks had settled and the Namasudra agriculturists served as tenants. It was undoubtedly the most miserable part of Bakarganj, supplying the bulk of the day-labourers of the district, while in the harvesting seasons the farm-hands of the richer southern thanas were entirely

recruited here.\textsuperscript{63} But even in these areas, produce rent seems to have been a rather modern development and in all probability was perhaps the result of the increase in the price of rice since 1870. Some of the petty landlords found it difficult to feed their families and turned to their tenants for the supply of rice, while some of them, not satisfied with supplying their own wants, set up a highly profitable trade in rice. Where vacant land was available it was leased at a produce rent. But in many cases existing low cash rents were converted arbitrarily into produce rents, particularly when the tenants were found in arrears or owed money to their landlords.\textsuperscript{64} And due to the unpredictability of nature, tenants were often caught in such a vulnerable position. In Gaurnadi thana, once or twice in a decade there a dreadful year would occur in which the floods would wipe out all the crops and render the Namasudra tenants almost penniless.\textsuperscript{65} The landlords would only have to wait for one such year to compel them to accept barga tenancy. Under this

\textsuperscript{63} J.C. Jack, Settlement Officer, Bakarganj and Faridpur, to the Commissioner of the Dacca Division No.937, 13/20 January 1909, Bakarganj Settlement Report, Appendix G-V.

\textsuperscript{64} Bakarganj Settlement Report, p.168.

\textsuperscript{65} Note by H. Savage, First Member, Board of Revenue, Eastern Bengal and Assam, 20 August 1908, Bakarganj Settlement Report, Appendix G-II.
system, the landlord's share was usually fixed at a half, but sometimes at a third of the total crop, and it was collected from the threshing floor itself. But soon the landlords found fault with this system, because of the difficulties in measuring the crop and the fluctuations in the amount with the varying seasons. They devised a new system, the dhankarari, "in which the rent was fixed at a definite amount of produce (so many maunds of paddy) and by which measurement and fluctuations were equally avoided."66

Ordinarily under this system none of the expenses of cultivation were borne by the landlord, so that both the burden and the hazard of cultivation were taken by the tenant himself.67 The karari rent usually represented little less than one half of the average crop and sometimes considerably more, leaving the tenant with the surplus paddy of the fat years, when it sold at low prices and taking from him almost everything in the lean years, when prices were prohibitive. In these areas the average cash rates were low, varying between Rs.3/- and Rs.4/- an acre, while on the other hand, the valuation of karari rents would


67. Ibid.
ordinarily be between Rs.12/- and Rs.10/- per acre, but occasionally much higher. Naturally, therefore, during the last few decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth, a considerable amount of land previously held at cash rates were speedily converted, on one pretext or another and by one means or another, into lands of produce-paying tenancies. And where barga system initially came into existence, it was soon converted into karari tenancy.

The barga system, it is true, was liable to abuse and was often used as an instrument of oppression. However, the cultivators, it seems, had accepted it without much hesitation, as after the cyclone of 1876, money had become scarce and dear and communications with the grain-markets insecure. But the dhankarari tenancies to them were simply detestable. Therefore, when the settlement operations started in Bakarganj, a large number of Namasudra tenants, led sometimes by the Christian converts, organised themselves in Gaurnadi and made verbal applications for commutation of their produce rents into cash rents. By section 40 of the


69. M. Le Messurier, Commissioner of the Dacca Division, to the Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Eastern Bengal and Assam, No.538, L.R., 9/10 June 1909, Bakarganj Settlement Report, Appendix - G-VII.
Tenancy Act of 1885, commutation could be made on the application of an occupancy raiyat by an officer making a settlement of rent under Chapter X. The landlords objected strongly to any such commutation and when the Settlement Officer, Mr. Beatson-Well, in a tour of inspection made it clear to them that commutation was a legal right of an occupancy raiyat, some of the Gaurnadi landlords began to sue their tenants, whose rents had been commuted, for three years' arrears of produce rents. This particular course was adopted by them merely to frighten the tenants, who had not as yet applied, from making any application, and to compel those whose rents had been commuted to continue paying in kind as before. Prior to 1904, there had never been a single suit for arrears of produce rents in the civil courts. In 1904, came the settlement operations with commutation, bitterly resented by the landlords, and in 1905 there were 209 suits for arrears of paddy rents accruing in 1901-02 and 1903. Out of these 209 cases, many contested, the landlords got decrees in 206 and this led them to boast openly in Gaurnadi, that they would bring their tenants to their knees by rent suits.


But history was destined to be different. When the settlement of the district reached what is technically known as the 'attestation' stage, the practice of commuting produce to money rents was introduced. Subsequently, however, it was held to be illegal, as section 50 of the Bengal Tenancy Act in the form in which it then stood, gave no authority to the Settlement Officers or their assistants to commute rents at the attestation stage. To rectify this illegality, one of the Assistant Settlement Officers, Radha Krishna Goswami, was "specially empowered" by the local government to deal with the applications for commutation and to proceed with them de novo. Nearly all these applications were granted and the money rent fixed was much below the value of the produce which hitherto fell to the landlord's share.\(^2\) This light money rent fixed by the new officer encouraged the other Jamshedpur cultivators of the marshy areas to form a combination and apply for further commutation. In order to induce others to join them, they circulated the story that it was in fact the government which was pressing for such commutation and in some cases they went so far as to

coerce, by social boycott, those who hesitated to apply. The result was the opening of the flood-gates. Goswami had started his work in April 1908 and the number of applications received up to August was 1,305. Of them, 1,160 were disposed of and in all cases except about 30, commutation was allowed. 73

The implications of such a development were not happy for the landlords. It meant a sudden reduction of the rent roll and the landlords did not accept it in good grace. As a first step, they filed a large number of appeals and, in those cases in which the time for appeal had expired, petitions for revision. 74 They also sent memorials to the Board of Revenue saying that "these proceedings are conducted to the special advantage of the tenants" and describing the findings of the Assistant Settlement Officer as "in almost all cases most arbitrary". 75 But as a last resort, as H. Savage, the first member of the Board of Revenue noted in August 1908, "the landlords intend either to harass their tenants by suits for the

73. Note by Savage, op.cit.
75. Memorial to H. Savage by the Residents of Bakarganj, 11 August 1908, Bakarganj Settlement Report, Appendix-G-I.
produce rents now in arrears and so bring them to their knees, or failing this to resort to the lathi, dao and similar weapons in the use of which the inhabitants of Bakarganj are past masters". But even then the tenants refused to be intimidated. When in early 1910, Atul Chandra Guha, the Deputy Collector, was asked to enquire and report on the disputed cases, in only 7 out of a total of 187 cases did the tenants fail to appear at the time of the enquiry.

Thus the commutation proceedings brought to the surface the long accumulated hatred between the high caste Hindu landlords and their suffering Namasudra tenants, the government projecting itself as the benefactor of the latter. Many of the landlords involved in such proceedings were men of very good circumstances, having a large trade in rice and sometimes closely associated with the swadeshi movement. Most notable among them were the Duttas of Batajore (to this family belonged Aswini Dutta), the Dasses of Goila, the Sarbajnas of Bakal and

76. Note by Savage, op.cit.
the Guptas of Chandshi. On the other hand, the commutation proceedings affected only about 7 per cent of the total area paying rent in kind in the whole district and the cases were only numerous in the marshy regions of Geurnadi and Mehendiganj thanas where mostly Namasudras served as tenants at produce rent. The fact indicates the effectiveness of the Namasudra caste loyalty for organising peasant resistance against a long perpetrated oppressive device of the all-powerful high caste Hindu landlords. The government also efficiently played the role of a dependable patron of the tenants and thus successfully fanned the feeling of hatred existing between the two classes. This attitude of the government is amply revealed in the following extract from a letter of J.C. Jack, written to the Commissioner of the Dacca Division, when the commutation proceedings were proposed to be discontinued:

"I might also add that the bil tenants have been a thing apart for years. They were originally driven to the bilas by the oppression of the higher castes; and previous to permanent settlement these colonies owned nobody as landlords. It was we who handed them over for nothing by the permanent settlement to these very higher castes from whose oppression


they had sought shelter in the bilis. These same higher castes had reaped always where the Namas only sowed. Now it is proposed apparently to throw them once again to feed the rapacity of the wolves." 80

It is, therefore, no wonder that in 1908, the Namasudra peasants in Bakarganj had become the strongest supporters of the British Raj and offered an active resistance to the swadeshi movement, which in their consciousness had come to be associated with the high caste Hindu gentry, their hated oppressors.

Such agrarian tension was not a local phenomenon of Bakarganj alone. In the bil areas of Faridpur cash rents at the prevailing rate were being converted wholesale into barga with a rent of half the crop. 81 Of course, it is true, that in the marshes, where the amount of land capable of cultivation varied each year, the barga system had its advantages and probably suited the tenants as well. 82 But in Kotalipara and Gopalganj, where the Namasudras mainly


81. Ibid.

82. Faridpur Settlement Report, p. 94.
resided, dhankarari tenures were rapidly proliferating
and under this system, the tenants had to pay a much higher
rent than the prevailing low cash rates.83 Petty frictions
were, therefore, not infrequent, as the cultivators often
attempted, although unsuccessfully, to get a cash rent
substituted for a produce rent.84 Disturbance between
the Namasudras and their landlords were also regular
occurrences. In January 1909, a case of looting in a
bazar was reported from Gopinathpur in the Naderipur
sub-division;85 and it was only a reported incident,
probably among many other unreported ones that were caused
by the "considerable trouble . . . . . between the Namasudras
and their landlords" occurring at that time throughout
the entire sub-division.86 The special officer who was
deputed to make a local enquiry, found it to be just an
attempt of the Namasudras to entangle their landlords
into some trouble and thereby to bring their own grievances

83. Ibid., p.32.
84. Ibid., p.103.
85. Fortnightly Report for the latter half of January 1909, Home (Political), GI, A March 1909, Prog.No.105.
86. Fortnightly Reports for the month of February 1909, Home (Political), GI, A April 1909, Prog. No.52.
to the notice of the government authorities. This excitement persisted till the end of the year and spread to the neighbouring regions as well. In late September, a case of house-breaking was reported from village Ghritakandi in Muksudpur thana of Sadar sub-division. When the police arrived and conducted searches in connection with the burglary, they were violently assaulted by the local Namasudras. The sub-inspector had to open fire in self-defence when one of his boatmen was seriously injured and a constable was struck down with a dao. Such turbulence and lawlessness, as it was reported, were almost general features of the Namasudras of Muksudpur during this time.

This atmosphere of tension and violence widened the gulf between the Namasudra peasantry and their high

87. Fortnightly Report for the first half of March 1909, Home (Political), GI, A May 1909, Prog. No. 131.

88. H. LeMesurier, Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, No. 8537-S.B., 20 October 1909, Home (Political), GI, A December 1909, Prog. No. 16.

89. Weekly Report, 9 October 1909, Home (Political), GI, B November 1909, Prog. No. 34.

caste landlords in Faridpur district and further stiffened the hostile attitude of the former towards the swadeshi movement, backed by the latter. In April 1909, the Namasudras of Faridpur held a meeting at Machkhali at which they resolved to boycott the higher classes who denied them social privileges. Before that, on 27 February an important meeting of the Muslims and the Namasudras had already taken place in village Maldia. Its object was to form a combination against the boycott movement. The meeting expressed its sympathy with the Namasudras of the locality, who were said to have been "inhumanly oppressed by the Swadeshi volunteers". And this political alliance took place despite the existence of communal tension between the two groups, particularly in the Gopalganj sub-division of Faridpur district and across the river Madhumati in the adjoining areas of Narail sub-division of Jessore and the actual occurrence of a riot at Tilchhara near Kasiani police station in the former sub-division around 1908-09.


92. 'National Volunteers' In Eastern Bengal and Assam: Report on their Organisation, Extent and Numbers, Home (Political), GI, Deposit, August 1909,No.26.

The agitation of the Namasudras for their social and educational advancement and the general tension prevailing among them in the districts of Bakarganj and Faridpur, led to a fresh series of political meetings by the nationalists. In Bakarganj, one such meeting was held in October 1909, under the presidency of Rajani Kanta Das, a pleader of Barisal, where Upendra Nath Sen, a well-known local leader promised a free site for a boarding house for the Namasudra students, and two others promised to canvass for subscriptions throughout the villages. During the latter part of the month, Ambika Mazumder made a tour in Eastern Faridpur with a view to engaging the sympathy of the Namasudras to the boycott movement in return for the promise of acceptance as members of Hindu society. Exaggerated accounts of the success of this tour appeared in the Calcutta newspapers, but the reports of the local government officers indicate that "the number of Namasudras who attended the meeting, or took the 'swadeshi vow' was in reality small." The government, however, took a serious notice of this new development, because it showed that "the importance of the so-called 'depressed classes' and the fact that they have hitherto been unaffected by the agitation ... were now being recognised and appreciated by its leaders." This

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95. Ibid.
96. Ibid.
realisation had prompted the leaders to invite Namasudras and other persons of low caste to swadeshi meetings where complementary things were said about them and they were promised social privileges if they agreed to take the swadeshi vow. The government regarded this movement "as extremely dangerous since it appeals powerfully to the most ignorant sections of the people . . . ." 97

There was, however, very little chance of these people being won over by the nationalists for the promises they made were not always adequately backed up by them. The higher castes were too afraid of the consequences of granting the Namasudras the privileges they asked for. 98

In early November, Ambika Mazumder went to Kotalipara thana in the Madaripur sub-division and held meetings at Paschimpur and Pinjuri villages. A considerable number of the local Namasudras appear to have attended the meetings and showed interest in the promises put forward by the speaker, on behalf of his brother Bengalis, that the higher castes would help the Namasudras in bettering their social position,

98. Ibid.
if they, in their turn, would assist the higher castes in the swadoshi and boycott movement. But the initial signs of enthusiasm rapidly subsided when the Namasudras found, soon after the meetings, that the reality of social relations had hardly changed. As the Sub-Divisional Officer of Gopalganj reports, even the liberal minded high caste bhadraloks were afraid to grant any privilege whatever for fear of offending the more orthodox sections and thereby creating internal social dissensions. So within a month, the question ceased to be actively discussed in the locality and appears to have been dropped altogether.

In the meanwhile, tension was mounting in other neighbouring districts as well. In 1909, the Namasudras and the Muslims of the Narail sub-division of Jessore made common cause to protest against the low opinion in which they were held by the higher caste Hindus. With this object they combined for some months and decided not to work as menial servants in the houses of the latter, or eat food cooked by them. In some parts of the Magura


sub-division also, the Namasudras refused to serve in the houses of the higher caste Hindus or cultivate their lands.\textsuperscript{101} In Mymensingh, around September the same year, the Namasudras of Katiadi, who used to serve as paki-bearers, refused to continue their work and in consequence were threatened by the leading Hindus of the locality.\textsuperscript{102} In January next year, they held meetings in different parts of the Tangail sub-division, at which they resolved not to serve the Kayasthas in any way, and the latter in return decided not to let land nor lend money to the Namasudras.\textsuperscript{103} Such tension between the two communities continued at least up to the beginning of 1911.\textsuperscript{104}

The growing dissatisfaction among the lower caste people in different parts of eastern Bengal prompted the nationalist leaders to organise in March 1910, three conferences at Patuakhali, Pangsa and Tangail in the districts of Bakarganj, Faridpur and Mymensingh respectively. The meetings were planned partially with the purpose of

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\textsuperscript{101} Jessore District Gazetteer, p. 50.
\textsuperscript{102} Weekly Report, 7 August 1909, Home (Political), GI, B September 1909, Prog. No. 47.
\textsuperscript{103} Monthly Report for January 1910, Home (Political), GI, A May 1910, Prog. No. 137.
\textsuperscript{104} Monthly Report for February 1911, Home (Political), GI, A April 1911, Prog. No. 20.
\end{flushleft}
improving the status of the 'depressed classes', but the government suspected political motives of fostering boycott agitation among this lower classes who had so long remained aloof from it. On no ground was it prepared to allow this, and all the three conferences were prohibited under the Seditious Meetings Act. The order of prohibition, however, brought "a sense of relief" to many people in all the three districts; perhaps, they were not yet fully convinced about the desirability of granting any concession to the 'depressed classes' which might disturb the existing social equilibrium. The government, it therefore seems, had in fact overreacted, as there was very little reason to be so apprehensive about the possible results of the meetings.

III

With the onset of the census operations, the whole Namasudra movement and the nationalist response to it began to take a new turn. Since the meeting with the Lieutenant Governor in 1907, a campaign was being organised by the Namasudras for securing social acceptance of their new, more pleasing, caste name in place of Chandal, the old despised one. The campaign was locally organised by Shyamlal Biswas of Jessore, Ramkinkar Ray, Dr. Dinabandhu Badoi, Dr.

Dr. Kalicharan Mandal of Dacca, Bhishmadev Das, Purna Chandra Mullick and Dr. Tarini Charan Bala of Faridpur, under the overall leadership of Guruchand Thakur. When society refused to respond favourably, they turned to the Census Commissioner. They were entered in the census tables of 1891 as "Namasudra or Chandal", and in those of 1901 as "Namasudra (Chandal)". But now on the eve of the Census of 1911, Dr. Mead suggested to Guruchand that scores of applications should be sent to the census authorities for the rectification of the returns. Hence messages were sent from Orakandi to different centres from where local leaders sent their separate applications to the Census Commissioner, E.A. Gait, then residing in Punjab, to the effect that they should be returned in the Census reports not as 'Chandal', but as 'Namasudra'. The application which was sent from Orakandi was recommended by Mead himself. The local government officials also seem to have supported them on this particular issue. The result was that, in the report of 1911, they were

entered as just 'Namasudra'; the hated appellation 'Chandal' was completely omitted.

The census agitation sometimes involved hostilities between the higher and the lower castes; but what concerned the nationalist leadership was not this social tension, but the political implications of such a movement. The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, by conceding the demand of the Muslim community for separate representation, had stimulated similar aspirations for separate electorates in the minds of many other social groups. The Namasudras were among them. And the apprehension does not seem to be without adequate ground in view of the following petition which the government received from the Namasudra community at about this time:

"We beg to add that, though our religious rites and their observances and social customs are similar to those of high caste Brahmins, we have not the slightest connection with any of the Hindu communities. We are not allowed to join them in their social and religious ceremonies. They have been continually looking down upon us with contempt and malice; have kept us under subjection and total ignorance. We have been smarting under their yoke of bondage. It is absolutely absurd to anticipate that they would, in future, mix with us in social and religious performances. Thus we desire to be recognised by the Government as entirely a different community having separate claim to political privileges like Muhammadans." 109

Such manifest and unmistakable signs of political separatism were probably also due to the notorious circular of E.A. Gait, the Census Commissioner, that the 'depressed classes' would be enumerated separately in the coming census. It at once became the target of attack by the nationalists who saw in it other political motives as well. There was a general impression prevalent among the Hindu politicians and the press that the "Hindus as a class were not receiving at the hands of the Government the amount of justice and fair play which their numbers, education and importance deserve .......". There were even proposals for the establishment of an all-India Hindu League for the protection of Hindu interests. The Namasudra movement in this context became vitally important to them as they desired "to use Namasudra agency to turn the balance against Muhammadans in East Bengal in cases of necessity". In Gait's Circular, as mentioned earlier, the nationalists saw a clear political motive of reducing numerical superiority of the Hindus by excluding certain untouchable castes from Hindu society. The circular was strongly criticised by the Hindu press, and the interference of both the retiring and the incoming Viceroy was sought to secure its withdrawal.

110. 'Annual Report, Indian Papers Published in The Bengal Presidency During the year 1910', (Calcutta 1911), p.4.

111. Ibid., p.36.
Simultaneously with such attacks on the controversial circular, the nationalists also attempted to spread their influence among these untouchable castes and tried to eliminate their suspicions and thoughts of political separatism. The nationalist press expressed a good deal of sympathy with them in view of the many social disabilities under which they laboured and the agitations started by the Namasudras, the Bhui Malis and others for the removal of these disabilities received considerable support. The extremist paper *Praja Sakti* declared: "We are on the eve of a social revolution ........ Talk of caste distinctions when India is a free country, and not now. Irresistible as the ocean tide the Sudras come on. They appeal to the greatest force of our times .......... the conscience of the civilised man." The *Barisal Hitaishi*, another extremist paper, observed: "All those who have eyes to see must have noticed how a grave wave of dissolution has touched the conservative Hindu Society, ........ willy-nilly, consciously or unconsciously, all people are being drawn into the vortex of this agitation, ........ God alone is to be the leader of this impending social revolution." The *Charu Mihir* advocated social reform from a belief that unless some reforms were effected in Hindu society, the Hindus could not hope to secure political rights,
and would deprive their society of the means of their own conservation. "Government officials do not attach much importance to their agitation," it remarked, "because of their indifference to the distress that prevails among the depressed classes." To win over the political support of these depressed sections of the society, the nationalists, along with such press propaganda, also organised meetings at different places. One such meeting took place on 13 December 1910 among the Namasudras in Nadia. It was held in the house of Sashi Bhusan Thakur, son of Guruchand, at village Kamalapur in Kumarkhali thana. Five or six hundred people assembled and resolutions were passed that the inferior caste of Namasudras should also enjoy the same privileges as other sections of Hindu society. The meeting was presided over by Sarada Charan Mitra, an ex-Judge of High Court, who was at that time organising a pan-Hindu movement in order to counteract the activities of the Muslim League.

112. 'Report on the Native-owned English and Vernacular Newspapers of Eastern Bengal and Assam' thereafter, RNNP (EB & A) for the year, 1910, Home (Political), GI, B August 1911, Prog. No.64.

113. Weekly Report, 17 January 1911, Home (Political), GI, B February 1911, Prog. No.3.
Early next year, Gait’s circular was withdrawn through a press communique which stated that there would be no departure from the established practice regarding the enumeration of castes. For the nationalists the immediate cause of anxiety was removed, but a concern for the future remained. Fortunately, however, soon they found an opportunity which they tried to utilise in all earnestness, to win over the Namasudras, who had been the most articulate group among the ‘depressed classes’ in pressing their separatist political demands. At this particular point of time, the working alliance between the Muslims and the Namasudras nearly broke down due to the outbreak of a series of riots between the two communities at different places of eastern Bengal. And the nationalists, by supporting the cause of the Namasudras, tried to earn their sympathy.

In June 1911 at Jaynagar Hat in Faridpur district, an altercation over the damage done by some cows trespassing in a field, was about to cause a serious riot between the Muslims and the Namasudras, as the two parties assembled to the number of 400 on each side and prepared to attack each other. Blood-shed was, however, avoided as wiser counsel prevailed among them when a police party arrived. During

114. RNNP (BB & A) for the year 1911, Home (Political), GI, B June 1912, Prog. No. 74.

the same month, the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet reported a riot between the two communities at Chaudhuri Bazar. A Muslim mob, numbering over a thousand and armed with spears and lathis, attacked the Namasudras and damaged their houses. According to the Deputy Commissioner, it was one of the offshoots of the movement among the Namasudras to improve their social status by refusing to serve as boatmen or palki-bearers. This irritated their former Muslim employers and the dispute about the impounding of a Namasudra's cow trespassing in the field of a Muslim led first to the Muslims being beaten up by the Namasudras, and then, a few days later, to this fierce riot. The names of 39 Muslims involved in the disturbances were obtained and 11 of them were arrested and sent for trial.116

The worst of these riots, however, took place in May 1911, in the border areas of the districts of Jessore and Khulna. This region was notorious for land-disputes leading to violent riots,117 and the immediate occasion of the present one was also a dispute over the possession of a piece of land. But there was a long background of complicated antecedents, leading to mounting excitement, bursting forth into a fierce riot over a petty land-dispute between two

individuals belonging to the two communities.


117. Commissioner of the Presidency Division, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.9 J.J., 24 January 1899, Judicial (Police), GB, April 1899, Prog. No.25.
In fact the first half of the year 1911 witnessed a series of riots in a contiguous region around the Jessore-Khulna border where the Muslims and the Namasudras resided side by side. The first of these riots took place in village Nalichar (or Nalerchak) in Khulna in January 1911, when a Muslim had seized some cattle belonging to a Namasudra, for damaging his crops. Although the cattle were rescued, this was considered by the Namasudras as an insult and to avenge it, about 4 to 5 hundred Namasudras attacked this Muslim village. The Muslims in panic set fire to a small hut, thinking that the fear of being accused of arson would desist the Namasudras. But the latter saw through the device, set fire to other houses and freely looted them. Definite complaints were received against 45 Namasudras, of whom 12 were committed to the sessions. The next incident occurred in village Harihargope in Mollahat police-station of Khulna. Here in March 1911, a Namasudra seized some cattle for damaging his crops. As these cattle belonged to a Muslim, some 50 or 60 of them attacked the Namasudras, pulled down a house and stabbed one to death. The next case was reported in April 1911, from Gadaipur, a village in Paikgacha police-station in Khulna, where the court litigation between a Muslim quazi and a Namasudra led to sustained tension threatening a riot, which was, however, averted by the timely intervention of the police. Another minor case of rioting was also reported from Magura police-station
around this time. But none of these seem to have any far reaching impact except the Nalichar case.

In this case, the twelve accused Namasudras were defended by "a barrister from Calcutta", and the contradictions in the evidence of the prosecution witnesses were made to create an impression that the Muslims themselves had set fire to all their houses. The Namasudras, as a result, were unanimously acquitted by a jury which included two Muslims. The judgement was announced on 13 May 1911 and the news spread rapidly over the Muslim villages in the area. The feeling of resentment and revenge deepened, but no immediate action was taken by the Muslims until the matter was brought again to a head by the Namasudras themselves in a village called Barnal (also called Chandinagar) in Kalia police-station in Jessore, about 8 or 9 miles away from Nalichar.

A Namasudra of Barnal, Kutiswar Mandal had been in possession of a considerable piece of land, about 170 bighas in that village, rented from the Hatberia Kayastha zamindar. In Bhadra 1314 B.S. (August-September 1907) the

118. G.S. Dutt, Magistrate of Khulna, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No.929 J-XIII-14, 5 June 1911, Political (Police), GB, File No.P5R-1, B July 1911, Progs. Nos.326-328.

land was sold in auction for arrears of rent and was settled in 1903 with some Muslims of the same village, Abdur Sardar and Krishna Mandal Tikadar. Kutiswar went to court to have the sale set aside, but in April or May 1910, Abdur was finally given possession of the land. Nothing in fact happened further till the time of cutting boro paddy (winter crop) came in May 1911. It appears that the wholesale acquittal of the Namasudras in Nalichar riot case on 13 May had given rise to a spirit of jubilation and hauteur among the Namasudras in Khulna and Jessore villages. On the 16th, Kutiswar with the help of a number of Namasudras cut the paddy of one portion of the disputed land. On the 18th, Abdur in his turn, collected some Muslims, recovered the paddy from Kutiswar's possession and looted his house. This enraged the Namasudras who began to collect a force from Sachidah, Kamarul and Patla, the three Namasudra villages near Nalichar, while Abdur also sent words to the Muslims in the neighbouring villages to join him. That afternoon, the Muslims looted about 17 Namasudra houses in Chandinagar, and the following morning, the Namasudras had their revenge by looting 34 Muslim houses including Abdur Sardar's in Chandinagar and 24 houses in the neighbouring villages of Bildhuria, Pilpanagar and Kunjapur in Jessore. 

120. J.H. Lindsay, District Magistrate, Jessore, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, 2 June 1911, Political (Police), GB, File No. F5R-1, B July 1911, Progs. Nos. 326-328; G.S. Dutt, Magistrate of Khulna, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No. 9293-MIII-14, 5 June 1911, op. cit.
Rumours about these Namasudra rampages spread like wild fire over the Muslim villages, as Muslim messengers on horse-back were sent to the north and the east for spreading the alarm that "the Namasudras were coming". A local influential Muslim, Dudu Mia, the Panchayat President of Kalabaria, also lent his support in mobilizing the Muslims, who gathered with surprising rapidity, not only from the neighbouring villages of Jessore and Khulna, but also from two or three villages across the river Madhumati in the Faridpur district as well. By the afternoon of the 19th, the Muslims had gathered in overwhelming numbers, estimated from 2000 to 5000, and from this time onward they had it all their own way. From about 2 p.m. they started looting Namasudra houses - 17 in Porekhali, 19 in Khamar and 7 in Ghanashyampur. The attack was specially furious at Khamar where some resistance was offered by Nabakrishna Biswas, the headman and the most wealthy of the Namasudras in the region. The looting spree continued into the next day and the Namasudras in panic started leaving their villages with their women, children and valuables.\footnote{121}

The rioting mob was, however, continuously chased by the Sub-Inspector of Kalia and the Deputy Collector, Sukesh Chandra Deb Roy. The appearance of the latter on \footnote{121. Ibid.}
horse-back and in a shola hat gave rise to the impression that the Superintendent of Police had arrived and it is probable that this prevented the Muslims from advancing further north to Kalia. Meanwhile the Magistrate of Jessore and the two Superintendents of Police of Khulna and Jessore arrived with the armed police. And this put a stop to rioting in the afternoon of the 20th May. The disturbances thus lasted for three days and thirteen villages in Jessore and five in Khulna were attacked. There were two confirmed and three unconfirmed deaths; six Namasudras and seven Muslims were injured more or less seriously. The loss of property in terms of its money-value was not that significant as the Namasudra villagers did not have much valuable property to be looted. In Jessore, it was estimated to be Rs.38,698 and in Khulna Rs.1,965. The loss was greatest in Khamar; elsewhere the rioters merely took away brass-utensils, door-frames, clothes, etc. some of which were later recovered from tanks, boats and jute fields. In most cases, the damage was confined to the destruction of huts and to the breaking of household utensils such as earthen pots and pans. There were a few cases of arson and only in one instance a

Magistrate who would "give his undivided attention to the cases" related to this riot. Later, B.N. Mukherjee replaced him in this position and as a result of their exertions, by December 1911, 17 cases (out of 20) were disposed off, in which 201 persons were convicted, 22 persons were acquitted and 15 were discharged, out of 270 sent for trial.

The area which had been directly affected by this riot of May 1911 comprised the southern part of Kalia police station in Jessore and the adjoining northern part of Sadar police station in Khulna district. But the rioters assembled from a far wider region of about 100 square miles in Jessore and 5 square miles in Khulna district. There was a number of purely Namasudra villages both to the extreme east and to the extreme west of this region. Between these two Namasudra


centres and to the north and south, there was a large number of villages inhabited by a mixed population of Namasudras and Muslims. Being conscious of their superior number in their own localities, the Namasudras took the offensive and made a petty personal quarrel a communal issue. But in the region as a whole, particularly in Kalia police station, the Muslims outnumbered them by about 50 per cent. Hence the situation soon got out of their hands and they found themselves on the defensive.

But more significantly, there were some other villages in the region, inhabited by the other castes of the Hindu community and these neither participated in, nor were affected by the disturbances. This particular feature distinguished this riot of May 1911 from the ordinary genre of Hindu-Muslim riots and gave it the character of a Namasudra-Muslim riot per se. The members of various other Hindu castes, living in the area, being concerned about the safety of their houses, consulted the local Muslims and were instructed by the latter to put up flags to distinguish their houses. They had no fear from the local Muslims who knew their houses. But as Muslims from distant areas formed the majority of the mob, the houses

130. G.S. Dutt, Magistrate of Khulna, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No. 929J-XIII-14, 5 June 1911, op. cit.

of other Hindu castes besides Namasudras ran a risk of being looted unless distinguished. Apparently the idea of adopting flags originated with some leading Muslims and the message was carried quickly to all the villages. Different castes adopted more or less distinctive flags or articles which came handy to them. The Jalias or fishermen tied up pieces of nets on sticks in front of their houses. The Kapalis or gunnybag-makers hung pieces of jute. The Kayasthas and Kaibartas hoisted white rags, the Baisnabs saffron flags which they used in worship and the Muchis (cobblers) put up pieces of skin.132 All these distinctive flags were erected by the non-Namasudra Hindus either on the 19th or the 20th May, as news began to spread of the advance of the Muslims. And none of these houses, except only one of a Brahman, was attacked by the rioters.133

The whole development, therefore, speaks of a pre-meditated plan. The sudden mobilization of a Muslim

132. G.S. Dutt, Magistrate of Khulna, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No. 929J-XIII-14, 5 June 1911, op. cit.

mob of about 4000 strong, marching "in a regular file of 4 in each row", is also difficult to explain otherwise. Indeed, after the Nalichar occurrence, the Muslims held meetings in Kalabaria and Bowishana (Kalai police station) in Jessore and in Atlia in Khulna police station. In these meetings the Nalichar outrage was described as a gross insult to their community and decision was taken to form village committees, so that they could have well-orchestrated action at the next probable contingency. All others, except the Muslims, were rigidly excluded from these meetings and hence, local inhabitants remained absolutely ignorant of this organisation. Some leading Muslims of the area, like Dudu Mia, the Panchayat President of Kalabaria and Hatem Moulavi the Panchayat President of Atlia, were actively involved in such organisational drives. When the police received information about these meetings and enquired about them, they were assured by Dudu Mia that the meetings were merely for the discussion of religious and educational matters. No further precaution was, therefore, taken against any possible disturbance.


135. J.H. Lindsay, Magistrate of Jessore, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No. 2007J., 9 September 1911, Political (Police), GB, File No. 3P-34, B February 1912, Progs. No. 43-48; also G.S. Dutt, Magistrate of Khulna, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No. 929J-XIII-14, 5 June 1911, op. cit.
Jitendranath Ray, the Hatberia zamindar, and his men also failed to take prompt action to control the Muslim riotors who had assembled in their villages. It might have been possible, as some of the local people suspected, that they were themselves interested in such a riot to put a stop to the refractory nature of their raiyat who fought with them so long over the possession of the disputed ganthi. And it was also rumoured, that the naib of the Hatberia zamindar, Kalibar Ghose, had himself brought the Muslims to punish Kuteswar Mandal. For while there was still a case pending between the latter and the Hatberia zamindar to set aside the sale of the land in dispute, the naib had settled the land with Abdur Sardar, "a leading Muhammadan" who had "a very bad reputation" in the neighbourhood. Under the circumstances, it may seem quite possible, that the riot was merely meant to settle this purely local dispute, but eventually got out of control. But it should also be borne in mind, that this case alone hardly explains the rapid mobilization of so many Muslims coming from such a wide area. Furthermore, the later enquiries revealed, that the zamindar and his men had no inkling that such an


137. J.H. Lindsay, District Magistrate, Jessore, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, 2 June 1911, op. cit.
occurrence was imminent. They gave information to the police as soon as they had come to know of the riots, although this was after the police had been informed already. But then, no one, in fact, had any prior information.

The situation, therefore, brings us to the question of consciousness. "The hatred", as the District Magistrate of Jessore rightly comprehended, was "due to feeling rather than to material matters." In this part of the country, cultivation was almost entirely in the hands of the Muslims and Namasudras, to the exclusion of other castes. The rise in prices and comparatively low rents made them relatively prosperous and thereby emoldened with a spirit of independence and self-respect. The waves of the new social movement started at Orakandi in Faridpur had reached the Jessore-Khulna villages much earlier, to encourage the local Namasudras to claim a higher social status. Although, newspapers generally did not find their way into this affected area, a copy

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138. G.S. Dutt, Magistrate of Khulna, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No.1879J.-XVIII-5 of 1911-12, 4 September 1911, Political (Police), GB, File No.3P-34, E February 1912, Progs. Nos.43-48.

139. J.H. Lindsay, Magistrate of Jessore, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No.2007J., 9 September 1911, op.cit.

140. J.H. Lindsay, Magistrate of Jessore, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, 2 June 1911, op.cit.
of a Namasudra paper of Faridpur, the Namasudra Suhrid, which
ventilated the grievances of the Namasudras, was found here.
It was "an undoubted fact" that the Namasudras of this region
had started regarding themselves a superior caste and were apt
to adopt a contemptuous attitude towards the Muslims whom they
looked down upon as an inferior community. Formerly, they used
to work as servants of the other castes of Hindus and Muslims,
making their ploughs and houses, thatching their huts and
working for them as field labourers. But gradually, they gave
up working for the Telis, Sundis and other low caste Hindus.
Occasionally, as we have seen earlier, they combined to
boycott the upper caste Hindus, like the Kayasthas. And now
they refused to serve the Muslims, with the result, that the
latter had to employ imported, and therefore, dear labour.
This naturally embittered the feelings between the two
communities. This Namasudra sensitiveness, arising out of
their newly acquired sense of pride, added to this bitterness.
Any supposed offence, however slight that might have been,
given by a Muslim to any member of their caste, was taken as
an insult to the caste as a whole, requiring immediate
punishment. And violent frictions between the two communities
occurred frequently, particularly in centres where the
Namasudras were the predominating element and the Muslims

141. E.W. Collin, Commissioner, Presidency Division, to the
Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.220
J.J., 9 June 1911, op.cit.
were in a minority.142

The Muslims for generations considered the Namasudras as an inferior people and the recent assertion of a higher status by the latter was naturally a cause of irritation to them. This lack of toleration was amply revealed when a Khulna paper reprinted an article from a Muslim paper Muhammadi, violently criticising a recent pronouncement of the Nadia pandits, that barbers might give their services to Namasudras. Although no copy of this paper was actually found in the affected area, this spirit of intolerance and irritation certainly pervaded the entire region. Moreover, during the last two years, there had been repeated disturbances, in all of which the Namasudras were the aggressors. The Muslims retaliated with violence and were, except only in the Nalichar case, successful. But in all cases they suffered more than the Namasudras in the criminal proceedings that followed.143 They, therefore, had ground for resentment and this was accentuated by the result of the Nalichar case in which, though greatly wronged, they failed to obtain satisfaction in the court. Their sentiments were further hurt by the haughtiness

142. G.S. Dutt, Magistrate of Khulna, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No.929J-XIII-14, 5 June 1911, op.cit.

143. E.W. Collin, Commissioner, Presidency Division, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.229,J.J., 9 June 1911, op.cit.
of the Namasudras who, after the announcement of the Nalichar judgement, allegedly "gave several maunds of bataisha /molasses - candy/ as Harir - loot /offerings to lord Hari/ and fell upon any and every Mahommadan they met on the hat with repeated Haribole /enchantment of the name of the lord Hari/. As a result, when the Earnal incident took place, religious colour liras deliberately lent to what was essentially a petty land dispute, by spreading exaggerated stories that a mosque had been broken and the Koran defiled by the Namasudra rioters. Lack of faith in the "whimsical" court, coupled with this whipping up of communal sentiments naturally led to a violent counter-attack. 144 And the leading Muslims used their organisational networks to co-ordinate this attack and some of them, like Hatem Moulavi and Moten Sheikh of Atlin were even seen directing the operations on horse-back. 145

Although, there is no evidence to suggest the involvement of any outside agent instigating the rioters, there was a good deal of politicisation of the incident after it had already taken place. The Hindu press wasted no

144. To the Hon'ble Nawab Bahadur of Dacca, the humble petition of the oppressed Muhammadans of Jessore and Khulna, 20-6-1911, Political (Police), GB, File No.P5R-1, B July 1911, Progs. Nos.326-328.

time in seizing this opportunity to win over the Namasudras by supporting their cause and condemning Muslim rowdism. Khulna Vasi of 3 June 1911 reported that Namasudras were "robbed of all their possessions by the Muslims". Basumati of the same day criticised the recent Muslim tendency of uniting in a large body, even on slightest provocation, and committing oppression on others. 146 Bengalee, being more balanced, lamented the fact that the ignorant persons of both the communities were so short-sighted, that they forgot their obvious interests and took part in a quarrel that could spell nothing but disaster for the country. 147 However, the most violent criticism of the Muslims appeared in a leading article published in the Amrita Bazar Patrika of 25 May 1911. It alleged that an inflammatory and "filthily abusive" pamphlet entitled The Cow and Hindu-Musalmah had actually instigated the Muslims to attack the Namasudras and might cause further communal violence. Although the government wanted to describe these riots as purely local in nature, the Hindu leaders constantly tried to tag it to the greater question of Hindu-Muslim relationship, as Surendranath Banerjee saw in them "further evidence of the baneful effects of the Partition." 148

146. Report on Native Papers in Bengal for the week ending 10 June 1911.

147. Bengalee, 26 May 1911.

148. Weekly Report, 30 May 1911, Home (Political), GI, B June 1911, Prog. No.3.
The Muslims of Jessore and Khulna, perturbed by such "false" and "exaggerated" reports in the Hindu press, appealed to the Nawab Bahadur of Dacca to represent their case to the government. Particularly, they wanted the enquiries to be conducted by "impartial officers", "either Mahommadan or European." Nawab Salimulla conveyed the prayer to the government, reiterating his "implicit faith in the British administration of Justice." But the government refused to consider it, as a special officer had already been deputed and there was no reason to suppose that he would fail to try the cases with care and scrupulous fairness. However, the controversial pamphlet had been forfeited in June 1911, under the Indian Press Act. And there was no more muckraking on the issue.

149. To The Hon'ble Nawab Bahadur of Dacca, the humble petition of the oppressed Muhammadans of Jessore and Khulna, 20-6-1911, op.cit.

150. Nawab Sir Salimolla Bahadur, Dacca, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 1 July 1911, Political (Police), GB, File No. P5R-1, B July 1911, Progs. Nos. 326-328.


152. Weekly Report, 13 June 1911, Home (Political), GI, B July 1911, Prog. No. 2.
The nationalists now felt the more urgent need to do something more constructive. The United Bengal Provincial Conference which was held in Faridpur on 9 and 10 September 1911, therefore, resolved "to take earnestly in hand" an elaborate programme of "social reform, especially for the elevation of the neglected classes". Lt. Colonel U.N. Mukherjee, the author of The Dying Race (1909), was specially invited to participate in the 'Social Conference' which was supposed to organise "attempts to improve the status of the Namasudras and other 'depressed classes' and to bring them into the fold of organised Hinduism". But the everwidening gap between promise and achievement gave the Namasudras adequate reasons to suspect the sincerity of such attempts.

The Brahmo Samaj had also started social work among the untouchables through its Depressed Classes Mission founded in 1909 under the guidance of Sibnath Shashtri. It started its first centre at Beras, a Namasudra village in the district of Dacca. Then in different areas of Faridpur, Jessore and

153. Resolutions of the United Bengal Provincial Conference (Faridpur, 1911), Home (Political), G.I. E October 1911, Prog. No.113.

154. N.D. Beatson-Bell, Officiating Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, No.1540N., 30 September 1911, Home (Political), G.I, E October 1911, Prog. No.112.
Khulna, the Mission, under the able leadership of people like Harinarayan Sen, did admirable work among the Namasudras and others, providing them with free education and free medical care. But even then, the record of the Depressed Classes Mission was poor compared with the Christian Missionary efforts. In 1911, at its annual meeting held in Calcutta, it was openly admitted that the Mission had not made much progress due to lack of finance.

But mere excuses were not enough to impress an ambitious group like the Namasudras, who were striving to put an end to their poverty, illiteracy and social disabilities. To them the record was more important and an unimpressive record was taken as an index of insincerity. The result was further alienation. Of course, not all the Namasudras thought in the same way, at least some of their educated members thought otherwise. Anathbandhu Gayen of Faridpur worked in close co-operation with Ambika Charan Mazumder and Bhyagai Haldar of Bakarganj was an associate of Aswini Dutta.


156. Bengalee, 6 August 1912.

Keshab Chandra Das of Dacca was also a swadeshi activist, who tried to counteract the loyalist influence of the Christian missionaries and endeavoured to secure influence and exercise authority over the Namasudra community, in order to mobilize them into the anti-government agitation. For this purpose, he also published a periodical called the Namasudra; its influence was officially regarded as "dangerous". But the larger Namasudra community offered only lukewarm response to such persuasions. Keshab was arrested for publishing seditious articles and his party was increasingly mistrusted, discredited and discarded by the Namasudras acting under the guidance of the people whom the authorities considered to be the "real leaders" of the community. 158

The extent of this disapproval can easily be measured from the history of the two papers related to the Namasudra movement. The Namasudra Suhrid, a "non-political" monthly, published from Orakandi, the main nerve-centre of the movement, was the original organ of the caste. It was edited by Aditya Kumar Chaudhuri, a Namasudra pandit of the Upper Primary School, Rasiani (Faridpur); the proprietor was Sashi Ehusan Thakur, son of Guruchand, and the publisher was

158. Revd. P. Noble, Baptist Mission, to F.C. French, Commissioner of Dacca Division, 15 October 1917, Political (Political), GB, File No.8A-10, B November 1917, Prog. No.65.
his younger brother Surendranath. The other periodical was Namasudra, started in late 1908 in Dacca in order to further the interests of the caste. It was owned, edited and published by Keshab Chandra Das of Chandshi (Dacca). The tone of the paper though sometimes offensive, was in general "moderate"; but often it showed a tendency of attacking the high caste Bengali government servants for allegedly neglecting the interests of the Namasudras. From 31 March 1910, the paper ceased to be printed, only to be revived once again from 14 July, when the staff of the Jhalakati National School took it over in order "to gain over the Namasudras to the agitation ....". From now on it was edited by Anath Bandhu Sen, a Baidya teacher of the Jhalakati National School, and was published by a Kayastha of Ujirpur, Lakshmi Charan Das. Around 1911, its tone was openly "anti-government and disloyal" and its well-published avowed object was to mobilize "the Namasudra class who were indifferent to the swadeshi agitation." The Namasudra Suhridd, however, retained its earlier character and organisation and continued to be

159. RNNP (EB & A) for the year 1908, Home (Political), GI, B January 1910, Prog. No. 83.


162. RNNP (EB & A) for the year 1910, op.cit.
"non-political" and "chiefly social". In this context, what is important to note is the ever-increasing popularity of the more loyal Namasudra Suhrid and the declining circulation of Namasudra since its take over by the nationalists. In 1908, the circulation of Namasudra was 500, while that of Suhrid, 550; in 1910, the year of the nationalist take over, the circulation of Namasudra went down to 300, while that of Suhrid to 450; but in 1911, the year of the Consus, while the circulation of Namasudra remained at 300, that of Suhrid shot up to 700. The figures are perhaps adequate to give us a clear idea about the growing alienation of the Namasudras, at least the educated Namasudras, from the cause of nationalism, around the year 1911.

However, in the same year the nationalists had a real opportunity to win over the Namasudras by utilising Gokhale's Compulsory Elementary Education Bill. On 16 March 1911, Gokhale introduced his bill in the Legislative Council "to make better provision for the extension of elementary education" by introducing gradually "the principle of compulsion". The government response was not at all favourable. The Government of Bengal was "opposed not merely

163. RNNP (EB & A) for the year 1911, op.cit.
164. RNNP (EB & A) for the year 1908, op.cit., RNNP (EB & A) for the year 1910, op.cit., RNNP (EB & A) for the year 1911, op.cit.
165. Legislative Proceedings, GI, June 1912, Progs.Nos.1-55, Appendix - A.
to the specific provisions, but also to the introduction at the present juncture, of the general principles embodied in the Bill." Sir Lancelot Hare was more categorical in pointing out the actual political implications of the Bill. In his opinion, it was "premature and impolitic" for it would "promote discontent and social unrest among the masses." Moreover, it would inevitably involve special taxation which would breed further discontent - more especially because there was already a possibility of additional taxation to make good the loss of opium revenue. The nationalists gave a full-throated support to the bill. The United Bengal Provincial Conference in September and the Indian National Congress at its Calcutta session in December, adopted resolutions in its favour and urged the government to enact it into law. The local organisations and their leaders were at the same time active in mobilizing popular support in favour of the

166. J.G. Cumming, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Legislative Department, No.1585 T-G, 13 September 1911, Legislative Proceedings, GI, June 1912, Progs. Nos.1-55, Appendix-P.


168. Officiating Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, to Secretary to the Government of India, Legislative Department, No.506T, 9 September 1911, Legislative Proceedings, GI, June 1912, Progs. Nos.1-55, Appendix M.

169. Resolutions of the United Bengal Provincial Conference, (Faridpur, 1911), Home (Political), GI, B October 1911, Prog. No.112; Resolutions Adopted by the XXVIth Indian National Congress, (December 27 and 28, 1911), Home (Political), GI, B April 1912, Prog. No.73.
But the government's fear of a social revolution arising out of compulsory education was fully shared by the orthodox section of society. A Hindu zamindar could not conceal his apprehensions when he wrote to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, that the "system of the wholesale spread of education for the masses .... will cause a great and violent disturbance in every phase of the present settled order of things; and will throw the whole country, as it were, out of its equilibrium, and such a system .... will not only ...... spoil the temper of the masses, but will tend to upset and disturb all the harmonious relations now existing between various classes and communities, domestic relations not escaping its disturbing influence." 

Although the bill was almost unanimously supported in some of its features by the vernacular press, the organs of the orthodox section of the community viewed it with considerable misgiving. As they apprehended, it was likely to foment social unrest within the community by imparting to the lower classes a smattering of


171. Raja Kumar Mahendra Ranjan Roy Chowdhury of Kakina to the Officiating Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 13 July 1911, Legislative Proceedings, GI, June 1912, Progs. 1-55, Appendix M.
education and imbuing them with a spirit of insubordination and intolerance of control by the higher classes. "It is, therefore, better," wrote Hindu Ranjika, one such paper, "that their children should remain altogether illiterate than have a very slight smattering of education."¹⁷²

But such a proposal of the orthodox Hindus could not be considered as 'better', by those who thought that for centuries they had been "smarting under their yoke of bondage."¹⁷³ In fact the Compulsory Elementary Education Bill was the only concrete nationalist proposal in which the Namasudras saw possibilities of fulfilment of their aspirations. Their organ Namasudra Suhrid wholeheartedly welcomed the bill because of the chances of an elevation of their social status through primary education. It ascribed the backwardness of the community to poverty which was perpetuated over years as their youngmen, without any education, had no other alternative but to pursue their hereditary occupations.

The only agency through which the poor Namasudra children

¹⁷₂. RNNP (EB & A) for the year 1911, op.cit.

¹⁷³. Monthly Report for February 1911, Home (Political), GT, April 1911, Prog. No.20.
could get some education was the missionaries; but their efforts were often misrepresented. So in this grim situation the proposed extension of primary education on the basis of compulsion was all the more welcome to them as to the other depressed sections of the society.  

But the nationalist leadership failed to make effective use of this sentiment. In December 1911, came the Durber Declaration about the annulment of Partition. And in their jubilation, the nationalist leaders failed to take note of the possibilities of using this issue in order to win over the sympathies of the Namasudras and the other 'depressed classes', whose support and sympathy were necessary for the success of their political movements. Guruchand was honoured by the government for his consistent loyalty, and Namasudra separatism became far more firmly entrenched, so much so, that even Gandhi's appeal in the days of non-co-operation could not make any considerable breakthrough.

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174. RNPP (EB & A) for the year 1911, op.cit.
175. Mahananda Haldar, op.cit., p.262.