CHAPTER VIII
NAMASUDRA MOVEMENT IV: 1925 - 1937
After the dreadful years of riots, full of distrust and tension, the Namasudras and the Muslims were once again coming to a rapprochement in different parts of eastern Bengal around 1925-26. Such a reunion to oppose bhadralok politics in Bakarganj had already caused a great alarm. And in the second half of 1926, even in worst affected parts of Faridpur, the two communities joined hands to organise a hartal to boycott the high caste Hindus during the pujas.\(^1\) The signs were ominous. The old anti-nationalist political front was once again gathering strength. The nationalists could hardly ignore it, as their adversaries, the British, were ever intent to cash in on a situation like this.

But at this time, the Swarajists were at the helm of affairs. And so involved they were in Council politics that they had very little time left for any constructive socio-economic programme to mobilize the masses in support of their movements. Nor they could bypass the issue. They decided, therefore, to handle it in their own way—by bringing it on to the floor of the Council. Dr. Mohini Mohan Das took the initiative. The

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1. A.N. Moberly, Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal, to H.G. Haig, Secretary, Government of India, Home Dept., D.O. No.1470P-D, 4 November 1926, Home (Confidential)\(\#\), File No.516 of 1926.
students of the depressed classes, he reminded the Government, were not allowed to reside in government hostels attached to schools and colleges in Bengal. Hence he demanded that the authorities should consider the desirability of making adequate provision for such students in the attached hostels.² Next, he requested the Government to reserve some seats in the Dacca Medical School for the students of the depressed classes, who would be better able to serve their own community. But the request was turned down by the Minister on reasons, which seemed to many as "untenable and fallacious".³ Then in the budget session of 1925, he demanded 2 lakhs of rupees to be earmarked in the Education budget for the primary education of the depressed classes. "Sir, though a Swarjist", he declared, "I have been compelled to put before the House this resolution by the urgency of the matter and I can say that if we had real power I would have either asked for a crore for the same purpose or moved for the introduction of compulsory primary education." The utter lack of education and the resultant inertia of these poor millions had created "an obstruction in the path of Swaraj". Although no proper measure in this direction could be taken without Swaraj, he emphasised, "we must, in the meanwhile, give them what

³. Ibid., Vol.19, 10 December 1925, p.356.
enlightenment we can and thereby help them to realise their situation." An amended version of his resolution was later accepted by the House. But apart from such meagre attempts through occasional questions and resolutions in the Council, the Swarajists did precious little to mobilize the masses, the socially conscious depressed classes in particular. Engrossed in Council politics, they forgot the world outside the four walls of the House. They became detached from the people as a result, and vulnerable to the "slightest organised opposition." The Indian National Congress, complained the Anandabazar Patrika in 1927, had always ignored the colossal strength of the masses. A few resolutions were once accepted in connection with the peasants and the labourers, but none were ever put into action. There was no wonder, therefore, it exclaimed, that this sham campaign for swaraj would come to nothing like a bewildered traveller in the desert.

This lack of a constructive programme, it is needless to mention, acted as a further disincentive for the socially ambitious Namasudras to integrate with the mainstream of national politics. If the Swarajists did not come forward for their salvation, the British were ever ready to help them; at least there

5. Bengalee, 28 January 1926.
6. Anandabazar Patrika, 29 April 1927.
was never any dearth of verbal sympathy. As a result, an official noted in 1928, "the class feelings of the Namasudras in Faridpur and Barisal have been more and more awakened and they have been, and are, putting forward repeated demands for improved means of education amongst their community and for more posts in the administration." A deputation of the Namasudras led by Mukunda Behari Mullick had already met Lord Lytton with such demands, and was assured "that no qualified candidate of ... their community will ever be passed over on the ground of his caste." A similar deputation met Sir Stanley Jackson later on and received a similar reply that helped to assuage their growing indignation. Meanwhile, hordes of petitions were pouring in, in various departments of the government, from the different organisations of the Namasudras. In December 1925 the Orakandi Namasudra Samiti asked for the appointment of a Namasudra Sub-divisional Inspector of Schools in Gopalganj in Faridpur, possibly because such an officer was expected to be more sympathetic to the needs of their community. They were assured forthwith that their request would be considered whenever a Namasudra officer of suitable standing and capability would be available in the

Education department for promotion. A few days earlier, the Kanchnmapara Namasudra Udbodhani Samiti had asked for reservation of seats for the Namasudras in medical, engineering and other institutions in Bengal. Then in early 1926 a Namasudra Conference at Jessore demanded more facilities for elementary education and a similar conference at Barisal asked for the introduction of compulsory primary education. The copies of the resolutions in both the cases were forwarded to the Director of Public Instruction for appropriate action.

A few months later, in March 1927, the Orakandi Association sent another long petition to the Education Minister for his consideration. "The Namasudra community", the petition emphasized, "is one of the most important elements of the backward classes in Bengal, its population forming about one-twentieth part of the total population of this Presidency." But they were generally so poor that they could not pay for the expenses of their education, particularly in the higher branches. Hence, they prayed for a greater number of stipends, reservation of seats in schools and colleges, more free-studentships, free hostel accommodation and scholarships for studies abroad. Moreover, the population of the Namasudras was


concentrated in the district of Faridpur where a number of schools had been started for their education. But for want of suitable encouragement and the unsympathetic attitude of the local authorities, most of them were in decaying condition. The Association, therefore, demanded special grants for such schools and the appointment of special Inspecting Officers in each division to supervise and encourage the spread of education among the people of the backward classes. Lastly, it demanded a certain proportion of appointments, "not less than twenty-five per cent of the total number", in the various ranks of the Education department, be made out of the eligible candidates of such backward classes. In reply to the petition the Government informed the Secretary of the Orakandi Namasudra Association that many of their demands had already been met, although on a moderate scale, and a comprehensive Primary Education Bill was under consideration, which was intended to meet the needs of all such communities.

Pending that, many other concessions were being handed out to the Namasudras to patronise their endeavours for social upliftment and in the process, to earn their gratitude and loyalty. When the Collector of Bakarganj requested

12 Kamalakanta Das, Secretary, Namasudra Association, Orakandi, to the Minister in Charge of Education Dept., Bengal, 15 March 1927, Education (Education), GB, File No.2P-35, B June 1927, Progs. Nos.895-896.

for a lump grant for distribution to the schools for the Namasudras, the Revenue department was asked to place a certain sum at the disposal of all the Collectors for such purposes. In 1929, a special grant was sanctioned to the primary school for the Namasudras in Kagmari in the district of Jessore. In October 1930, the Director of Public Instruction drew the attention of the Education department to the fact that in the Dacca Division the Namasudras had shown "a keen desire for education and a commendable enterprise in building up schools." But the limited number of free studentships permissible under the existing rules led to a steady depletion of students which was by no means desirable. Under the circumstances he pleaded for a general revision of the rules to provide for "additional free places up to an annual limit of 15 percent of their own enrolment ...." The proposal was sanctioned, as we have already seen, in April 1932.


16. H.E. Stapleton, Director of Public Instruction, Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Education Dept. No.1147, 27 October 1930, Education (Education), GB, File No.78-3, A April 1932, Progs. Nos.34-36.
So far as the hostels were concerned, in Pirojpur, the local dispensary used to supply medicines to the inmates of the Namasudra hostel, free of cost. But in 1927 they discontinued the supply for lack of funds. The Government, however, thought that the Namasudra boys were "generally very poor" and it would be "difficult for them to pay for medicines." Hence a special annual grant was sanctioned for this purpose. This was done as an extraordinary concession in an exceptional case, by overriding the existing rules that required all boarders to pay for their own medicines. Apart from this, in 1928 the Government sanctioned the hiring of a Namasudra hostel attached to the Patuakhali High English School.

The grants for the maintenance of the Namasudra messes in Dacca and the Namasudra hostel run by the University of Calcutta, were also continued.

So many concessions given to one particular community naturally aroused the envy of other groups situated in a similar

17. Director of Public Instruction, Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Education Dept., No.342-1H-10-27, 23 March 1927; B.B. Sarkar, Assistant Secretary, Government of Bengal, Education Dept., to the Commissioner, Dacca Division, No.3711, 12 August 1927, Education (Education), GB, File No.1H-36, B September 1927, Progs. Nos.61-62; also Notes, p.1.


socio-economic condition. This often became manifest, for example, in the venom not so concealed in the speeches of Charu Chandra Das, the nominated representative of the depressed classes in the Bengal Legislative Council. When Mohini Mohan Das in 1925 asked for two lakhs of rupees for the primary education of the depressed classes, Charu Chandra demanded the amount sanctioned to be "equitably distributed amongst the several sections of the community." For there was "a class of the depressed people styled Namasudras", he warned the Council. They were the chief inhabitants of two districts of eastern Bengal, forming about three-fourths of the population of that region. The benevolent Christian Missionaries were always with them to uplift their moral and political status. Through "their influence and owing to the preponderance of the number of this class and the consequent concentration of efforts, they generally catch the eye of the Government whenever the existing privileges came to be distributed amongst the backward classes." The other depressed classes, on the other hand, though worse off, were scattered over the whole province and "their numerical strength being weak, their interests are generally neglected for their inability to make themselves heard." As an example, he cited the Namasudra hostel in Calcutta which did not admit students of other communities, although their needs were similar.20

So the crucial thing was that the Namasudras were more successful in making themselves heard, as a result of which they were going ahead of the other depressed sections of the society. For this purpose, from 1929-30 onwards, they were using the public forums, the Legislative Council, the District and the Union Boards, more effectively. They could do so because their superior numerical strength, their concentration in a contiguous region and above all active and constant countenance from the Government ensured their entry into these bodies in ever increasing numbers. However, this was true only in a relative sense, i.e., in comparison with the other depressed groups. So far as the high caste Hindus were concerned, they were still trailing far behind, decisively outmatched by the political skill and electioneering techniques of the former. In the Council election of 1926, for example, none of the Namasudra candidates, including such prominent leaders as Mukunda Behari Mullick and Bhishma-dev Das, could get through. The only saving grace was the nominated member, Rai Sahib Rebati Mohan Sarkar, whose entry into the Council was thus absolutely due to the patronage of the Government. The same thing happened in 1929, when the only Namasudra candidate elected to the Legislative Council was Dr. Mohini Mohan Das, a confirmed Swarajist. But this time, the Government was more generous, as they nominated two Namasudras, Mukunda Behari Mullick
and Rebati Mohan Sarkar, thus making a significant departure from the existing convention. However in 1930, the Congress decided to launch a vigorous political programme of non-co-operation and civil-disobedience. The Swarajists came out of the Council and in the bye-elections boycotted by the Congress, three more Namasudras were elected without any contest. They were Amulyadhan Ray from Jessore, Lalit Kumar Bal from Bakarganj and Sarat Chandra Bal (the son of Dr. Tarini Charan Bala who was on the Namasudra delegation to Lancelot Hare in 1907) from Faridpur. Thus, in 1930, among the 10 representatives of the depressed classes (elected-8, nominated-2) in the Bengal Legislative Council, 5 were Namasudras. It reflected the fact that this particular caste was most vigorous in pushing its claims and that concessions given to the depressed classes in general were likely to be monopolised by those having more initiative. For the Bengal government, this became a strong argument to be used in their recommendations to the Indian Franchise Committee in January 1932 against the proposal of granting separate electorate in this province. But it was also true that only the Namasudra members represented the real


interests of the depressed classes; the rest, excepting the
two Rajbansis, represented other interest-groups as well.
The Reforms officer, therefore, recommended special constituency
for Bengal, as envisaged in the Communal Award. This was
particularly deemed necessary as all the districts where
more than fifty per cent of the Hindu population belonged
to the depressed classes, returned mostly caste Hindu
candidates. The imbalance had been redressed to some extent
in the case of the Namasudras in 1930, as atleast in Bakarganj,
Faridpur and Jessore, one of the two elected candidates from
each of these districts belonged to this community. But
this was more of an illusion - the result of the Congress
boycott of that particular election.

However, the Namasudras were more successful at
the local level, where their numerical superiority ensured
them larger representation on the elected self-governing
bodies. In Faridpur, for example, around 1928, there were
four Namasudra members in the Gopalganj Local Board. Their
representation in the Union Boards was also "considerable,"
although they were as yet unrepresented in the District Board

23. Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No.1R-133 of 1932,
A July 1933, Progs. Nos.20-21, Notes, p.3 and
Appendix I and II.
or the Municipalities. In Bakarganj, however, they obtained representation, both by election and nomination, at all the levels, on the Municipalities, District Board, Local Boards and Union Boards. In Jessore also, there were Namasudra representatives in the District Board, some of the Local Boards and in several Union Boards. In neighbouring Khulna, there were a few Namasudra Municipal Commissioners, although there was none among them on the District Board. Their representation in the Local Board was also meagre, but they were substantially represented in the Union Boards, some of which, under Namasudra Presidents, were almost dominated by them. And if in other districts they failed to secure adequate representation in proportion to their numbers, it was, as was diagnosed by the Collector of Dacca, only due to a lack of "instinct for


27. District Magistrate, Khulna, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No.4J, 2 January 1929, Appointment (Appointment), GB, File No.5M-114 of 1928, A February 1930, Progs. Nos.7-20.
organisation which would enable them to make their numbers felt by outmanoeuvring the dexterous caste Hindus. But the most important fact that comes out from the reports of the district officers is that, the Namasudras were progressing and prospering in all directions, so much so, that it was anticipated that before long they would not fall into the category of the depressed classes. And those who did not share in this progress were also consciously trying to improve their lot.

It was perhaps this limited progress, a taste of power and prosperity, that made the Namasudra leaders more ambitious and more keen about organising for political purposes. The depressed classes had by now emerged as a political interest group at an all-India level. The All India Depressed Classes Association had been formed in 1917, and important Namasudra leaders, like Mukunda Behari Mullick, Birat Chandra Mandal, Bhishmadeb Das, Dhananjay Ray and Rasiklal Biswas, established contact with this all-India movement. In 1926, in a conference at Kanchrapara, these leaders established the Bengal Depressed Classes Association with Mukunda Behari Mullick as its President. The new organisation remained closely connected with the Bengal Namasudra Association, both of them being headed by Mullick.

In the same year, in an all India Depressed Classes' Conference

held at Delhi, Bengal was represented by three young Namasudra leaders, Birat Chandra Mandal, Bhishmadeb Das and Dhananjay Ray, while Mandal also took an active role in the next year's conference at Victoria Hall, Madras. By 1928, the Bengal Namasudra Association had set up about 22 local units in the districts. To co-ordinate their activities in a more systematic way at a conference in Faridpur in the same year, it adopted a formal constitution and sent a delegation, headed by Bharatchandra Sarkar of Dacca, to Sir Stanley Jackson to plead for its official recognition. Consequently, in 1929 the Association was formally recognised by the Government. The same year, an all Bengal Namasudra Conference was held at Dacca. It was presided over by Birat Mondal, who had already established himself as an undisputed leader of the depressed classes' movement. In the next year he became a member of the Executive Committee of the All India Association as the representative from Bengal. 29 Thus gradually by 1930, the Namasudras came to the forefront of the depressed classes' movement in Bengal, providing it with almost all its front-ranking leaders. And this political group, as we shall see later, was destined to play a crucial role in the politics of the province during the next decade.

But while the leaders of the Namasudra community became so engrossed in institutional politics to secure more special benefits from the government, the masses continued their struggle for economic and social rights. They were now sufficiently conscious about backwardness and exclusion from many of the social privileges enjoyed by the high caste Hindus. This consciousness led the Namasudra share-croppers in Khulna to form a combination with the Muslims around 1928-29. They refused to cultivate land as bargadars, unless they were given two-thirds share of the produce. In the neighbouring areas of Jessore too, the bargadars of the two communities had combined for a similar agrarian demand. Moreover, in this district, the poorer Namasudras, who used to work as menials in the houses of the higher caste people, had almost completely given it up. This economic struggle also had broader social implications, as they were always insistent in claiming equal civic facilities. In 1929 this assumed wider dimensions in Dacca, where the local Namasudras organised a prolonged satyagraha to secure their entry into the Kali-temple at Munshiganj.

30. F.A. Sachse, Commissioner of the Presidency Division, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No. 51-S-G, 9 January 1929; Magistrate of Jessore, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No. 17J, 2 January 1929; District Magistrate, Khulna, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No. 4J, 2 January 1929, Appointment (Appointment), GB, File No. 5M-114 of 1928, A February 1930, Progs. Nos. 7-20.
The trouble between the Namasudras and the Brahmans had been brewing for a long time in Dacca. But this particular satyagraha, curiously enough, was the offshoot of the Provincial Hindu Conference, held at Dacca on 26 August 1929. One of the principal speakers at the conference was Swami Satyananda and one of the resolutions passed stipulated that every Hindu had an equal right to every public place of Hindu worship. Meanwhile there was a strange co-incidence. An act of bigotry on the part of the orthodox custodians of the Kali temple at Munshiganj had caused a deep bruise in the hearts of the local Namasudras. A poor member of their caste had the temerity to walk into the temple and ask for a sip of the holy water with which the feet of the Mother had been washed. But it was soon discovered that the man was a Namasudra and, therefore, an untouchable. He was at once pounced upon by the priest and mercilessly belaboured by others present. This act of social humiliation added to the feelings of deep resentment which had already been furmenting in the minds of this community and Swami Satyananda decided to organise this rightful indignation into a satyagraha. On 29 August, a meeting was held near the temple, under the auspices of the Hindu Mahasabha. It was presided over by Satyananda and it resolved that on the morning of the 30th, a mass procession of the Namasudras would force their entry into the Kalibari. The Sub-divisional Officer, apprehending a breach of peace, immediately issued an injunction under section 144 Cr.P.C. against the leaders, forbidding them to hold any meeting
or procession. But in spite of that, the next morning, the Swami with 25 Namasudras attempted to enter the temple. They were prevented by a police-guard, whereupon they retreated and took their seats in the Natmandir in the temple premises.31

Since then the satyagraha went on continuously. Groups of Namasudra youths took up their position in the outer precincts of the temple and were relieved at intervals. There had been little or no violence of any kind, but both parties were extremely obstinate and unwilling to surrender any part of their claims. The Pleaders' Bar at Munshiganj sided with the orthodox section, the proprietary right of the Kalibari being mainly in their hands. The Bar Association held a meeting on 5 September to discuss the grave situation arising at the temple. After a heated discussion for about three hours, the meeting resolved that the Namasudras and other untouchable communities did not have the right to enter the inner shrine of the temple, as it was "not .......... sanctioned or recognised by any local usage or custom." This naturally made matters worse, as the war-front was now clearly drawn and the prospect

31. O.M. Martin, District Magistrate, Dacca, to the Commissioner of the Dacca Division, No.865-C, 27 September 1929; Liberty 18 October 1929, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.610(1-5) of 1929.
of an amicable settlement too remote. Although the Congress did not actively intervene in the matter until now, the attitude of its leaders was sympathetic to the Namasudras. On 6 September, some local Hindu leaders, like Karuna Kishor Guha and Manoranjan Banerjee, and the local Swarajist M.L.C.'s, Pratul Chandra Ganguli and Mohini Mohan Das, visited Munshiganj to study the situation locally. The District Magistrate also thought that Ganguli, being himself a Kulin Brahman, was the best person to effect a settlement. The team had a long but futile discussion with the leaders of the movement and several leading pleaders of the orthodox section. Meanwhile, a strong police force was stationed at the spot to prevent any forceful entry against the wishes of those in charge of the temple.  

But while the local administration was looking at the situation as a law and order problem, the authorities in Calcutta put it in its proper political perspective. They did not like "the Magistrate and the Police upholding the Bar Association's rights in the temple against the claims of the Namasudras" and the Magistrate letting off the initiative to Pratul Ganguli to effect a settlement. "It is undesirable that Government should be placed in the position of appearing

32. O.M. Martin, District Magistrate, Dacca to the Commissioner of the Dacca Division, No.8650, 27 September 1929; also, Newspaper Cutting-1, Home (Confidential), GB, File No. 610 (1-5) of 1929.
to side with either party in this dispute and of using the Police to support the action of one section of the Hindu community", wrote the Chief Secretary to the District Magistrate of Dacca. Every encouragement should of course be given to settle this dispute by compromise, he further noted, "but care should be taken not to encourage the idea that the Swarajist party and not Government are the real friends to the depressed classes." The District Magistrate had also visited Munshiganj earlier and had made almost the same suggestion to the Sub-Divisional Officer. The Police-guard on the temple, he thought, was really unnecessary and might cause a bad impression on the public. In fact, there was a great consternation among the people, as it was being strongly rumoured that punitive tax would be levied to meet the expenses of the Police guard at the temple gate. But the S.D.O. did not accept the suggestion, as he apprehended an imminent trouble. And then, himself a Kayastha, he also shared the belief that the Namasudras did not have any legal right to force their way into the temple.

33. W.D.R. Prentice, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal to O.M. Martin, District Magistrate, Dacca, D.O. No. 3957 P.S., 30 October 1929, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.610(1-5) of 1929; also Notes, p.2.

34. O.M. Martin, District Magistrate, Dacca, to W.D.R. Prentice, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, D.O. No.921C, 4 November 1929; also Newspaper Cutting 1, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.610 (1-5) of 1929.
The agitation reached its climax in the middle of October, when on the Mahashtami day nearly two thousand Namasudra satyagrahis congregated at the precincts of the temple and led by Swami Satyananda and other local leaders like Nripendra Chandra Banerjee and Surendra Mazumder proceeded to the main shrine in orderly batches. But resistance from the Police-guard turned the peaceful procession into a violent mob. The Police retaliated with lathis, causing minor injuries to about 17 Namasudras. Banerjee and Mazumdar, who were supposed to have instigated the attack, were arrested immediately. But the S.D.O. "deliberately refrained" from arresting any of the Namasudras. No action was taken against Swami Satyananda either. Soon after this, the Police guard was withdrawn. But the press criticised the Government for spilling the blood of the innocent satyagrahis and appealed to the Congress to intervene "in the interest of a wider nationalism". J.M. Sen Gupta visited Munshiganj on 28 October; but he too failed to bring about a compromise as both the parties were still intensely agitated. But before long, the tension subsided and the movement died a rather disgraceful and barren death.\(^{35}\)

During all these years neither the Bengal Namasudra Association nor any other leader of the Namasudra movement raised a finger in support of the satyagrahis.\(^{36}\) It was possibly

\(^{35}\) Liberty, 18 October 1929; also, O.M. Martin, District Magistrate, Dacca, to W.D.R. Prentice, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, D.O. No. 9210, 4 November 1929, op. cit.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
because of the latter's association with the Hindu Sabha and the Congress. But even if the Namasudra leadership had become somewhat detached from their masses, the frustrating experience of the recent movement, the lukewarm attitude of the Congress and the stubborn orthodoxy of the high caste Hindu society, drove this community even further away from the mainstream of national politics. Their own leaders were still nearer to them than either the Congress volunteers or the local high caste leaders of the Hindu Sabha. And this became quite evident when the civil disobedience movement started in 1930 with its demand for purma swaraj.

The Executive Committee of the All India Depressed Classes Association, in a meeting at Simla on 13 July 1930, condemned the civil disobedience movement as an agitation "started by the extremists sic politicians in the Country ...... to overthrow the British rule in India", and called upon the provincial associations to organise loyalist movements to fight it with all their strength. The meeting, which was attended by Birat Chandra Mondal, further expressed its pleasure at the announcement about the Round Table Conference, opposed the immediate granting of dominion status to India before untouchability was removed and demanded special electorate to safeguard their political rights.37 But even before that, the Namasudras of Bengal had started opposing the civil disobedience movement in every conceivable way. At an organised level, a meeting of

37. Reforms Office, GI, File No.163/III/30-R.
mobilizing this vast peasant community and some of them were in fact persuaded to join the campaign. One such meeting was held at Swarupkati, where a Namasudra was "induced to preside". But except for such isolated pro-Congress speakers who were "widely exploited by the Congress", the Namasudras on the whole remained "solidly anti-Congress" and "stoutly opposed to the present agitation and to those responsible for it."^41 So proven was their loyalty to the Raj, that the Government in 1931 decided to enrol them in larger numbers in the armed branch of the Police, "to meet the disturbed conditions which resulted from the civil disobedience movement."^42

Simultaneously with this, the leaders of the community got actively involved in the on-going constitutional debate to ensure greater representation for themselves in the future legislative bodies. The All India Depressed Classes' Leaders' Conference that met in Bombay on 19 May 1931, was

^41. Extract from Report by the Intelligence Branch, C.I.D., Bengal, on the Political Situation and Labour Unrest for the week ending 9 July 1930; also, J.T. Donovan, District Magistrate, Bakarganj, to G.B. Synge, Under Secretary, Government of Bengal, Political Dept., No.1477C, 31 July 1930, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.597 (1-3) of 1930; District Magistrate Bakarganj, to the Commissioner of Dacca Division, D.O.No.801C/2-31, 6 May 1931, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.345 (1-3) of 1931; also see Sitanath Biswas, Op.cit. pp.117-118.

attended by Rasiklal Biswas from among the Namasudras. The meeting welcomed the decision of the Government to resume the work of the Round Table Conference and demanded fair and adequate representation of the depressed classes of all the provinces of India in this conference. And as a safeguard against the high caste domination exerted through Congress, the leaders of the depressed classes demanded "their right as a minority to separate electorates." Afterwards, when in early 1932 the question of separate or joint electorate created a rift in the depressed classes' movement, with M.C. Rajah forming a pact with B.S. Moonje on joint electorate with reservation of seats, the Bengal Namasudras sided with Ambedkar and his demand for separate electorate. In the Nagpur Conference in May 1932, the resolution that upheld Ambedkar's minorities pact regarding separate electorate proposed in the Round Table Conference, was moved by Mukunda Behari Mullick himself. Already in March, in his Minute as the Member of the Bengal Franchise Committee, Mullick had argued that "the term 'Hindu' does not indicate any homogeneous race". At the one end, there were the more privileged castes, like the Brahmans, Kayasthas, Baidyas, the Nabasakhs, the Sahas, Subarnabaniks and the Mahishyas, while at the other, there were the deprived millions of the depressed classes

43. Reforms Office, GI, File No.K.W. of 35/31-R.

44. The Hindusthan Times, 29 February 1932; Leader (Allahabad), 11 May 1932, Reforms Office, GI, File No.111/32-R.
who formed about 20 percent of the population of Bengal. It could never be denied, he argued, that this vast numbers of people should have their representation in the legislature of the province and that this representation must be true and proper as also effective. And to achieve this result, "their representation should be from amongst themselves and in proportion to their numerical strength."45

The Communal Decision, announced in August 1932, allocated 10 seats to the depressed classes in Bengal, to be filled in through special electorates. The depressed classes were partly satisfied, because of the special electorate, but partly disgruntled as the number of seats they received fell far short of their expectations. But as the nationalist criticism of the Award went on mounting, they also began to girtle up their loins to defend it. At this juncture those Namasudra leaders, like Amulyadhan Ray, Sarat Chandra Bal, Lalit Kumar Bal or Pramatkaranjan Thakur (the grandson of Guruchand, who was now an England returned Barrister), who still did not see eye to eye with Mullick or his associates, now formed an All Bengal Depressed Classes Federation, as a parallel organisation to the existing Association run by the Mullick group. However, the difference between the two organisations was more of personality, rather than of philosophy.

Under the auspices of the Federation, a special session of the All Bengal Depressed Classes' Conference was held on 28 August 1932, with Rai Sahib Panchanan Barma, the renowned Rajbansi leader, as the President and all those Namasudra leaders mentioned above as prominent participants. P.R. Thakur, in his welcome address as the Chairman of the Reception Committee, thanked His Majesty's Government for creating a special constituency for the depressed classes, but expressed his utter dissatisfaction at the number of seats allocated to them in the Bengal Legislature. His speech was followed by the Presidential address by Barma and the adoption of five important resolutions. In the first of these, the Conference "reiterate its unswerving loyalty to the Crown." The second "place on record its strong condemnation of the Civil Disobedience Movement and the terrorist outbreaks". The third resolution demanded "at least 37 seats in the Bengal Legislature out of the 80 seats in the general constituency." The fourth thanked the Prime Minister and the British Cabinet "for accepting the principle of the separate electorate for the depressed classes of Bengal", while the fifth opposed a second chamber "as being pernicious to their interest." The resolutions, in other words, chalked out in clear lines the main political demands and attitudes of the depressed classes' movement in Bengal, the Namasudras being at its forefront.

46. Amulyadhan Ray, Secretary All Bengal Depressed Classes Federation, to the Private Secretary to the Governor of Bengal, 11.9.32, Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No.1R-90, B August 1933, Progs. Nos.870-886.
However, the whole situation took an abrupt turn with Gandhi's decision to fast unto death to secure the abrogation of special electorate for the depressed classes. Several meetings were held in Calcutta and in the interior, to remove untouchability and to meet the other social grievances of the depressed classes, so that, they too might agree to joint electorate with caste Hindus, with several seats reserved for them, and the life of the Mahatma could be saved. One such meeting was held in the Faridpur town on 17 September 1932, under the auspices of the local Bar Association. It was attended mainly by the caste Hindus, some students and the Congress workers, while some Namasudras living in the town, including Rai Sahib Sarat Chandra Bal, were also persuaded to attend. Mathura Nath Moitra, a local pleader who was elected President of the meeting, spoke of the necessity of removing all the religious and social grievances that the depressed classes were aggrieved at, so that they might agree to the revision of the Communal Award to save the life of Mahatma Gandhi. After this, a resolution was moved that requested the people of the depressed classes to accept the joint electorate with reservation of seats. Bal suggested a number of amendments to it and asked for more time for proper consideration of its implications by other members of his community who were not present in the meeting. But his amendments were disallowed and his request turned down. Thereupon, a more soft-liner Namasudra, Kishori Mohan Sarkar, under persuasion by the Congressites, moved another resolution which said that all the communities of the Hindus, including the depressed classes,
preferred a joint electorate with reservation of seats. Once again Bal and his group opposed it vehemently and finding themselves grossly outnumbered, walked out in protest, amidst jostlings and showering of abusive words by the students and the Congress volunteers. Later the organisation of the Faridpur depressed classes refused to be bound by this "partial meeting" of the persons who were always against their interests and oppressed them in every conceivable way.¹⁷

The Faridpur District Depressed Classes Association, which had been formed under the initiative of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur,¹⁸ held a special general meeting on 22 September to review the situation created by the commencement of Gandhi's fast two days earlier. The meeting participated by the members of various castes like Namasudra, Kapali, Chamar, Malo, Kaibartta etc., unanimously resolved to "support and approve of the communal Award", even in spite of the hazard to Gandhi's life.¹⁹ Two days later, on 24 September the President of the Association wrote to His Majesty, the king Emperor, demanding at least 50 seats for the depressed classes in the Bengal Legislature, at

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¹⁷. A Hindu Meeting at the instance of Faridpur Bar Association on 17.9.32, Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No.1R-90, B August 1933, Progs. Nos.870-886.


and their reaction was also sharp and bitter. On the very next day, the Secretary of the Faridpur District Depressed Classes Association informed the Government that they were "not at all prepared to agree to the terms of the Agreement." Because the number of seats allotted to them was inadequate and the procedure of election faulty, for after the primary election, the Scheduled Caste candidates would have to fight in the joint elections, where the rich and influential Hindus and zamindars together with the Congress people would exert their influence "to return their hired man or men from the depressed classes".

The condition of Bengal, they emphasized, was different from that of other provinces and therefore, "Dr. Ambedkar ought to have consulted the leaders of the provinces before he advance[d] to sign the Agreement as reached for himself." 52 Two days later, on the 27th, the Depressed Classes Federation also condemned the Poona Pact as "Dr. Ambedkar's political blunder" and upheld the Communal Award as "a political advantage unprecedented and unparalleled in the constitutional history of India." 53

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52. Surendra Chandra Mazumdar, Secretary, Faridpur District Depressed Classes Association, to Governor General and Viceroy of India, 25 September 1932, Reforms Office, GI, File No.199/R/1932.

The Mullick group, however, had their dilemmas, partly because of their close association with Ambedkar and partly because one of their associates, Rasiklal Biswas, now the Secretary of the All India Depressed Classes Federation, was himself present at Poona and he sincerely believed that the 30 seats allotted to the Bengal depressed classes in the provincial legislature were calculated on the basis of their population and, therefore, justified. Yet they had very little choice but to join the chorus. The Bengal Namasudra Association and the Depressed Classes Association in an emergency joint meeting on 26 September unanimously resolved that "the alleged settlement does not at all solve the problem so far as Bengal is concerned; and the Depressed Classes of Bengal at least are not bound by it." Dr. Ambedkar, the two associations noted "with extreme regret", had "assumed the role of a dictator" by not consulting the matter with the All India Depressed Classes Federation, of which he himself was a member, and thus "practically gave away the real cause of the Depressed Classes". The other representatives of these classes, who met at Poona, had "practically no experience of any election" and, therefore, could be easily "hood-winked" by "a body of clever, caste-ridden Hindus". The Settlement which was thus

54. Rasiklal Biswas, Secretary, All India Depressed Classes Federation, to the Reforms Officer, Government of Bengal, 19 December 1932, Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No.1R-2 of 1933, A April 1934, Progs. Nos.9-61.
arrived was extremely faulty as a result. The joint electorate, as the past experience showed, could never ensure proper representation of the depressed classes. The number of reserved seats, '30', was hopelessly inadequate, as it "ought to have been 50 in a House of 250". And the panel system was "a device to introduce a rupture and ultimately a failure of the true and effective representation of the Depressed Classes". Hence the Government was requested "to keep to the spirit of the Award given by the Premier on this intricate communal question ....."55 But within a couple of weeks, the two associations met again and decided to accept the Poona Settlement as "the next best thing for them."56 Subsequently, the Federation leaders also came to the same decision as the Agreement, now accepted by the Government, seemed to be more or less irrevocable. Thus the two groups came closer to each other as the growing non-Congress orthodox Hindu opposition to the Poona Pact and their mounting antipathy towards the favoured depressed classes required an immediate mending of the fences. When Jitendralal


56. R.C. Roy, Joint Secretary, Bengal Depressed Classes Association, to the Viceroy of India, 19 October 1932, Reforms Office, GI, File No.199/R/1932.
Banerjee in March 1933, moved in the Bengal Legislative Council his resolution for the withdrawal of the Settlement, so far as Bengal was concerned, both Amulyadhan Ray, the Secretary of the Federation and Mukunda Behari Mullick, the President of the Association, rose together to withstand this orthodox Hindu backlash.57

But while this constitutional debate was going on, the Namasudra leaders did not either desist from demanding other forms of government patronage, namely educational facilities and employment, which they considered to be necessary for the social upliftment of their community in a modern world. They kept on repeating these demands, both within and outside the Council, throughout the period. When in the budget of 1930 no special provision was made for the education of the depressed classes, Sarat Chandra Bal reminded Government that they had "always declared themselves to be guardians and custodians of these uneducated millions....." Hence, he continued, "justice requires that the depressed classes who are reputed for their devoted loyalty and sincerity of heart should be protected and every facility be given to ameliorate their condition." First of all the "Government should make adequate provision for their education."58

But the more important problem for such communities around this time was about getting employment rather than education, which had now become more freely accessible. In the Council meeting of 18 March, Bal, therefore, placed a demand for the reservation of "at least one-third of the appointments for the qualified candidates of the depressed classes as has been done for the Muhammadans." On the next day, Mukunda Behari Mullick argued that this was necessary "not for the sake of an appointment merely, but for the sake of giving an impetus to the less educated brethren of theirs towards education as also to make them feel that they are also the inhabitants of this country." Although the Provincial heads were always sympathetic to their claims, the local recruiting authorities, he alleged, were often influenced by caste-prejudices. And the high caste Hindus, "the so-called leaders of the country", had done nothing for these people, "except showing their sympathy".

The Government was, however, paying adequate attention to their problems during this time. Some special provisions had already been made for their recruitment to the Provincial Services. And when the list of castes to be specially treated for this purpose came for revision in May 1930, the Namasudras, in spite of

60. Ibid, 19 March 1930, p.158.
the considerable progress they had already made, were retained, though this time they were entered as a 'minority community' and not as a 'backward class'.

A few months later, the Government realised that in order to encourage education among the backward classes, it was necessary to provide for more employment for these people, at least in the ministerial services. An enquiry revealed that in the Namasudra concentration areas, particularly in Faridpur, Bakarganj, Jessore and Khulna, the backward classes were very poorly represented in the services. In Faridpur they held only 5.47 per cent of the sanctioned posts, in Bakarganj 1.83 per cent, in Jessore 1 per cent and in Khulna 1.26 per cent, while they constituted 23, 15, 22 and 35 per cent of the population of these four districts respectively.

In many cases, of course, there were no suitable candidates forthcoming from these classes. But in Faridpur qualified Namasudras often aspired for such posts and in Bakarganj, as the Collector reported, it was only their "timidity that kept them away", as it was "notoriously very hard to penetrate the barriers of those who now hold the fort." These high caste Hindus who constituted only 13.5 per cent of the population in Faridpur and 14.5 per cent in Bakarganj, monopolised 66.6 per cent of the appointments in these two districts. As an

61. Appointment (Appointment), GB, File No.1-D-146, A September 1930, Progs. Nos.12-17, Notes, p.3 and Appendix A.

62. Appointment (Appointment), GB, File No.4-D-10 of 1930, A June 1931, Progs. Nos.36-41, Appendix A & B.
experimental measure, therefore, the Government decided to recruit depressed class candidates in at least one out of every three non-Muhammadan vacancies in these two districts. In other districts, as we have seen earlier, the recruiting authorities were only asked to give special encouragement to such candidates, with no reservation being provided for.63

But in spite of a Government Memorandum issued in April 1931 to this effect, only a few depressed classes' candidates were recruited in the ministerial services. And according to all available information, only three Namasudras all over Bengal got any government employment whatsoever during 1931-32.64 Their representatives in the Council, therefore, once again raised a furore. The government circular was not given effect to by the District authorities in Faridpur, complained Sarat Chandra Bal in March 1933. The same thing happened in Bakarganj, Amulyadhan Ray pointed out in April. He also gave a list of 39 recruiting authorities all over Bengal who paid scant attention to the Memorandum. The Government acknowledged that

63. A.H. Clayton, Commissioner, Dacca Division, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, No.4296 R, 22 November 1930; J.T. Donovan, Collector of Bakarganj, to the Commissioner of Dacca Division, No.5014 L.R., 11 September 1930, Appointment (Appointment), GB, File No.4-D-10 of 1930, A June 1931, Progs. Nos.36-41; also Notes, p.3.

64. 'Statements' in Appointment, GB, File No.81-35 of 1932, B April 1933, Progs. Nos.429-430; Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol.41, No.2, 28 March 1933, pp.634-635.
some officers in the districts did not comply with the orders and their attention would once again be drawn to the matter. But in most cases the situation was either due to the dearth of suitable candidates or the prior claims of other communities, notably Muslims.65

The Namasudra leaders were now more insistent on these demands, as the Poona Pact in its clauses 8 and 9 had stipulated that the depressed classes should have adequate representation in the public services and more educational facilities should be provided for them. In this connection, a delegation led by Pramatha Ranjan Thakur met the Governor in Faridpur on 24 July 1933. Thakur, first of all, expressed his concern at the exclusion of these clauses from the White Paper. The Governor, in reply, pointed out that it was a matter of all-India application and was at that time being considered by the Joint Select Committee. It would be premature to give effect to these clauses before the new constitution came into existence. Thakur then straight-way came out with a more specific demand regarding their representation in the public services. Certain proportion of the posts, he entreated, should be guaranteed to them on a population basis, as was done in the case of the Muslims. The Governor pointed out that the effect of their proposal would be to divide up the services into water-tight communal divisions, i.e., to keep competition within

communities themselves and to leave no field for open competition irrespective of community. The deputation, however, saw no objection to that consequence, while Thakur further reiterated that, in any case, at least ten per cent of the posts should be set aside for the depressed classes in Bengal. And these posts should not go to such groups as the Sahas, who had lately prospered considerably and did not any more make common cause with the other really depressed sections of the community. Finally, Thakur pleaded, that these classes ought to have secured at least one high judicial post, for they had among them men with European legal qualifications. In fact, he and three other members of the delegation were members of the English Bar. The Governor promised them to communicate their representation to the proper authorities, as many of their demands were of all-India implications. But meanwhile, he advised them to keep Dr. Ambedkar informed and to induce the depressed classes of the other provinces to make the same recommendations.  

However, on the same day, the Governor informed another delegation of the Muslims that the Government was going to

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66. 'Notes of a discussion with a deputation of the Faridpur District Depressed Classes Association that waited on His Excellency on board the "Sonamukhi" at Faridpur on the 24th July 1933', Appointment, GB, File No.8L-95, B September 1933, Progs. No.271; also, Notes, p.3. The members of the delegation were Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, Sarat Chandra Bal, Jogesh Chandra Sarkar, Monranjan Das, Shyama Charan Biswas, and Kishori Mohon Sarkar.
review the whole question of the reservation of posts, and
the depressed classes, along with the Muslims, would also
be considered in this connection. 67

A few months later, Amulyadhan Ray and Sarat
Chandra Bal gave notice of a resolution to be moved in
the February (1934) session of the Bengal Legislative Council.
The resolution said that 25 per cent of all appointments should
be reserved for the candidates of the depressed classes. It was
admitted, but did not reach the stage of discussion. 68 The
same thing happened, when Mukunda Behari Mullick tabled another
resolution, regarding employment of the Scheduled Caste candidates
in the public services, for discussion in the December session
of the Council. 69 Almost simultaneously, the Bengal Depressed
Classes Association complained to the Government that the
existing rules for recruitment of the members of the backward
classes and minority communities were wholly unsatisfactory and

67. 'His Excellency's Reply to the Addresses presented at
Faridpur on 24 July 1933; Appointment, GB, File No. 8L-95,
B September 1933, Prog. No. 271.

68. Appointment, GB, File No. 8L-1, B September 1934, Prog.
No. 167, Abstract; File No. 8L-2, B September 1934,
Prog. No. 166, Abstract.

69. Appointment, GB, File No. 8L-51, B December 1934, Prog.
No. 531, Abstract.
demanded for them the reservation of at least 20 per cent of posts in all public services. After a few months, in April 1935, a Namasudra conference at Orakandi urged the Government to constitute a service commission exclusively for the purpose of recommending candidates from the depressed classes. Under such continuous pressure the Government decided to review the situation in June 1935, and an enquiry revealed that a sufficient number of qualified candidates were in fact forthcoming from these classes. Under the circumstances, they issued a Memorandum in September 1936 which stipulated that fifteen per cent of the total vacancies in the Districts of Dacca, Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore, Khulna, Birbhum, Burdwan, Murshidabad and the 24 Parganas, would be filled up by the members of the minority communities and backward classes.

This was indeed a redoubtable victory that could mainly be attributed to the campaign launched by the Namasudra leaders.


71. Appointment, GB, File No. 4D-7, B April 1935, Prog. No. 743, Abstract.

72. G.P. Hogg, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to all Commissioners of Divisions, No. 6051-6055A, 25 June 1935; Memorandum No. 9898A, Government of Bengal, Appointment (Appointment), Dept., 21 September 1936, Appointment (Appointment), GB, File No. 4-D-3 of 1934, A November 1936, Progs. Nos. 31-44.
During all these years, when the Namasudra leadership was fighting for employment or educational facilities, the peasantry had receded to the background. Of course, the leaders were not completely oblivious of their problems and grievances. Sarat Chandra Bal, for example, demanded in March 1930 an immediate re-excavation of a Khal in Gopalganj, through which water-hyacinth was entering every year from the nearby river to destroy paddy and jute plants of more than 174.9 square miles of land in the bil areas. Similarly, a depressed classes' conference in Jessore in February 1933, extended whole-hearted support to a resolution brought by Tamizuddin Khan in the Bengal Legislative Council, for the repeal of the provisions regarding landlord's transfer fee, preemption and enhancement of rents in the existing tenancy legislation. But that was all. There were no constructive programmes, either economic or social, and no propaganda meetings involving the rural masses. And as the established leaders of the Namasudra movement, now more engrossed in constitutional debates and council politics, began to neglect the peasantry, the latter rallied more and more round the Praja movement, under the leadership of an as yet less known man, Jogendranath Mandal, a close associate of A.K. Fazul Huq, the originator of the agitation.

74. Ibid, Vol. 41, No. 1, 20 February 1933, p. 44.
The Praja movement had started around 1914-15 and rapidly became popular among the Muslim and lower caste peasantry of eastern Bengal. In 1921, under the inspiration of Fazlul Huq, a big Praja Sammelan was held at village Aguljhara in the Gouradi Police Station in Bakarganj, where there was a large concentration of cultivating Namasudras. The conference was presided over by Khan Bahadur Hashem Ali Khan, a local Praja leader, and was addressed, among others, by two Namasudra leaders, Jogendranath Mandal and Lalit Kumar Bal. Thereafter, the movement gradually spread to the other districts of the province. In 1929, a broad-based provincial tenants' party, Nikhil Banga Praja Samiti was formed, which in 1936 changed its name into Krishak Praja Party. During the 1930's this tenants' movement gained further momentum and more popularity, due to the slump in agricultural prices. Leaders like Mandal mobilized more and more Namasudras under its banner. But, fortunately for the leaders of the Namasudra movement, the Praja Party had to abandon its Scheduled Caste base towards the end of 1936 for the sake of electoral politics and the former obtained, as it were, a well-manured field without much effort.76

For the Namasudra leaders around this time, constitutional rights and political power seemed to have been more important than anything else. The backwardness of their community was no more a matter of real concern for them, but rather an issue to be capitalized on in the constitutional battle. The movement in this way lost its early protestant character and entered the blind alley of elite-oriented separatist politics. But that these leaders could indulge in such self-complacency was mainly due to the fact that the high caste Hindus, and for that matter the Congress, were even further away from the Namasudra masses, still imbued with an articulate caste-consciousness and full of hatred for those up in the social ladder. The elitist Namasudra leaders still enjoyed some popular support, though it was only by default.

To their great satisfaction, the provisional list of Scheduled Castes which the Government announced in January 1933 included the Namasudras. It was opposed by the Indian Association; for the Namasudras, it thought, "by their education and enlightenment" were "in no way backward." The Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha also thought in the same way. The Namasudras, it pointed out, were "an important community" and education had advanced among them "to a fairly large extent." Hence, by no means, they could be

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regarded as depressed. The Namasudra leaders took strong exception to such subversive propaganda. A meeting of the working committee of the Federation, on 18 February, presided over by Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, appealed to the Government not to attach any importance to the opinions of such organisations with regard to the inclusion or non-inclusion of any caste in the schedule. \(^7^8\) Altogether seven petitions, including that from the Bengal Namasudra Association, were sent to the Reforms Officer, pleading inclusion in the list. There were, of course, four petitions demanding exclusion. But they were based on the notion, given currency by a circular from the Hindu Sabha, that inclusion would stigmatise the members of the caste. The District Officers of all the 12 districts, where the Namasudras could be found in any number, were unanimously in favour of inclusion. Under the circumstances, they were retained in the final list of Scheduled Castes.\(^7^9\) And thus was crossed the first hurdle towards the enjoyment of the special rights to be provided for in the coming constitutional arrangements.

But there were other problems, too, for example the panel system. The Bengal Namasudra Association and the Depressed Classes Association had already pointed out in September 1932 that

\(^7^8\) Secretary, Indian Association, to the Reforms Officer to the Government of Bengal, 15 February 1933; Secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, to the Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal, 17 January 1933; Secretary, All Bengal Depressed Classes Federation, to the Reforms Officer to the Government of Bengal, 18 February 1933, Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No.1R-2 of 1933, A April 1934, Progs. Nos. 9-61.

\(^7^9\) 'Broadsheets', Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No.1R-2 of 1933, A April 1934, Progs. Nos. 9-61.
the preliminary election and the panel procedure would ultimately lead to a failure of the true and effective representation of the depressed classes. First of all, it would be difficult for them to put up four equally qualified and prominent candidates. Two consecutive elections within a short space of time would be costly and above all, it would be almost impossible to mobilize the electors twice at such a short interval. More the leaders realized its implications, more hysterical they became. If the Scheduled Castes failed to send more than four candidates, exclaimed Sarat Chandra Bal in the Legislative Council in 1935, "what will be the result? ....... a boon will be turned into a curse." It would be "an act of definite want of political farsightedness", he warned, "if the Government fails to come forward to save the scheduled castes from this danger." This would "directly retard the political advancement" of this community, in contravention to the principle of the Communal Award and in violation of the spirit of the Poona Pact. But whatever might have been the hazards of the system, it was an arrangement agreed to by their representatives at Poona. And now they had little choice but to swallow it.

The other problem was about the delimitation of the Scheduled Caste constituencies and the distribution of the reserved seats. It involved a lot of interplay of conflicting interests, with the Namasudras demanding more seats in the areas where they had a

80. R.C. Roy, Joint Secretary, Bengal Depressed Classes Association, to the Reforms Officer, Government of Bengal, 27 September 1932, Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No.1R-90, B August 1933, Progs. Nos.870-886.

larger concentration. Amulyadhan Ray, in a note on the subject, argued that the main principle in forming the depressed classes' constituencies and distributing seats for them should be "to secure genuine representation of those classes." And to achieve it, constituencies should be made of the rural areas and more seats should be allotted to those districts where the depressed classes were most numerous. In districts, where the number of these classes was less than half of the number of the so-called caste Hindus, and where suitable candidates were not likely to be available, "seats should be given in a limited form." On the other hand, in those districts, where the number of these classes was greater than or almost equal to the number of the caste Hindus, "seats should be given to the depressed classes even more than what they get on the population basis." Those districts, where the population of the depressed classes was less than three lakhs, should get no seat at all. Applying these criteria, he sought to apportion the major share of the seats, about 22, between the two main areas inhabited by the two most articulate groups among the Scheduled Castes, the Namasudras and the Rajbansis. For the Namasudra area, he demanded 14 seats (or 46.67% of the total), 3 each in Faridpur and Khulna and 2 each in Bakarganj, Mymensingh, Dacca and Jessore; and for the Rajbansi areas, 3 each in Rangpur and Dinajpur and 2 in Jalpaiguri.82 In a similar note, Sarat Chandra Bal, argued that "the 30 seats reserved for the Depressed Classes

82. A Brief statement on the subject of delimitation of constituencies and distribution of seats reserved for the depressed classes of Bengal, by Amulyadhan Ray, M.L.C., Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No.1R-30, A April 1934, Progs. Nos.103-111.
should be confined to rural areas only" and they should be distributed according to population and voting strength and above all "political importance" of the different groups within this community. However, in another earlier note, he had given a more concrete suggestion of forming at least 4 special depressed classes constituencies in Faridpur. These people, he argued, constituted 51 per cent of the total Hindu population in this district; but in spite of their superior numerical strength they had never been able to send any true representative to the Council. The result was that those who had any desire to be Members of the Legislative Council, Bhishmadeb Das, for example, went over to the Congress. Therefore, "to save the loyal section of the Depressed classes" in this district, special constituencies must be formed. Only then, "the Depressed Classes will be saved and the Congress element will die out."

The final allotment of seats, as announced by the Government on the recommendations of the Provincial Advisory Committee, which included Mukunda Behari Mullick, failed to satisfy any of these leaders. The Federation in general approved of the principles followed by the Committee, but they were particularly aggrieved as only one seat had been assigned to Bakarganj, which


84. Sarat Chandra Bal to R.N. Reid, Member of the Executive Council, Bengal, not dated, Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No. 1R-90, B August 1933, Progs. Nos.870-886.

85. The allotment of seats in the Namasudra areas were like this: Bakarganj-1, Faridpur-2, Mymensingh-2, Dacca-2, Khulna-2, Jessore-1; see Statement V, Appointment (Reforms) Department, Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No. 1R-30, A April 1934, Progs. Nos. 103-111.
contained a large colony of the Namasudras. The Scheduled Castes of Bakarganj, who formed more than 50 per cent of the total Hindu population of the district, complained Sarat Chandra Bal in the Legislative Council, had been reduced to "a minority and placed under the domination of the caste Hindus". As a remedy, he suggested that one seat be taken either from Nadia or elsewhere and be allocated to Bakarganj Rural (General) constituency (Patuakhali and Pirojpur Sub-divisions) where the majority of the Namasudras of the district resided. And if that was not possible, at least the reserved seat allocated to Bakarganj North-East Rural (General) constituency (Sadar and Behola Sub-divisions) be transferred to South-West Rural (General). Lalit Kr. Bal also came out with the same allegation: "a serious injustice had been done to the scheduled castes of Bakarganj district by reserving only one seat for them" and also by allotting it to a wrong constituency. From the standpoint of population as also in consideration of the political consciousness and the spread of education among the Scheduled Caste people of the Bakarganj district, they deserved at least two seats. But while Bakarganj was thus deprived, the Provincial Advisory Committee, by deviating from the accepted criteria, i.e., population ratio and the necessity of securing "genuine representation", allotted seats to districts like Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia and Howrah, where the Scheduled Caste population was less than half of that in Bakarganj. Consequently, there was much less chance of any "genuine"

representative getting elected from any of these districts. His suggestion to remedy this anomaly was, however, the same as offered by Sarat Bal. But the other representative of the Namasudras, Amulyadhan Ray, did not approve of these proposals. He stood up to record his "emphatic protest" against the suggestion of depriving Murshidabad and Nadia of the two seats allotted to them. He, however, regretted that no provision had been made for the representation of the Scheduled Castes in the Provincial Upper House. "It would have been fair and just", he thought, "if 4 out of 10 general seats would have been reserved for the scheduled castes and allocated to the four Divisions, namely, Burdwan, Dacca, Presidency and Rajshahi". But in spite of all these protests, the Government refused to alter an arrangement that had been made on the basis of intricate calculations about checks and balances. Hence the parties had to proceed to the coming elections, with the things remaining as they stood.

The Federation had already been making preparations for elections through different conferences. One such conference was held at Bongaon in 1934 and another at Jhenida in 1935.

88. Ibid, pp.111-112.
Bengal Namasudra Association did not sit idle either, although there was a great defection from their ranks. Rasiklal Biswas had joined the Congress and later Mukunda Behari Mullick became a subject of controversy when he consented to put his signature, along with Biswas, on a Congress-sponsored Hindu Memorial against the granting of separate communal representation to the Muslims, in spite of their forming the majority of the population in Bengal. However, this did not affect their election prospects. Most of the Namasudras fought the election as independent candidates, although a few like Rasiklal Biswas, Jagneswar Mandal or Mohini Mohan Das did accept Congress ticket. The Krishak Praja Party, in order to project a pro-Muslim image to withstand Muslim League propaganda, did not put up any candidate in the Scheduled Caste seats; and this brought Jogendranath Mandal closer to the caste movement of the Namasudras and induced him to contest the election as an independent candidate. In the primary elections that took place on 21 November 1936, amidst less enthusiasm and with much less voters' turnover, most of the prominent leaders got berth into the final panel for the general election, which was scheduled for January 1937.

90. To the Marquess of Zetland, Secretary of State for India, The humble memorial of the undersigned representatives of the Hindus of Bengal, including the Hindu Members of the Bengal Legislative Council, Home (Constitution and Elections), GB, File No.R. 3C-1, B June 1937, Progs. Nos.110-119.

91. Md. Enamul Huq Khan, op.cit., Chapter IV.

In the general election, 13 Namasudras were elected from different constituencies all over Bengal. One of them was a Congress nominee and another came out victorious in a non-reserved seat, while several prominent Federation leaders were defeated. In Jessore, the Congressite Rasiklal Biswas defeated Amulyadhan Ray by an impressive margin of 8,277 votes, although he had to concede defeat in Khulna. In the latter district, Mukunda Behari Mullick came out victorious; but Manmatha Ranjan Thakur, Pramatha Ranjan's younger brother, lost to a Congress candidate Patiram Ray. Mukunda's brother, Pulin Behari was elected from Howrah. In Dacca, Dhananjay Ray defeated Mohini Mohan Das, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur and Birat Chandra Mandal were returned from Faridpur, defeating among others, Sarat Chandra Bal and the Congress nominee Jajneswar Mandal. Lalit Kumar Bal was also defeated in Bakarganj (South-west) by a less known person Upendranath Edbar. The other Namasudra candidates, who also won the election against reserved seats, were Madhusudan Sarkar from Bogra-cum-Pabna, Amrita Lal Mandal and Manmohan Das from Mymensingh, and Jagat Chandra Mandal from Tippera. But all excitement was concentrated in a single constituency, Bakarganj North-East (General), which was a predominantly Namasudra area and for which the Namasudra leaders had been consistently demanding, although in sheer futility, the allotment of a reserved seat.

In this unreserved seat, Jogendranath Mandal had filed his
nomination as an independent candidate. And after a straight and keen contest with the local popular Congress leader Sarat Datta, he came out victorious by a rather narrow margin of 1,416 votes. The result of this single constituency, if not anywhere else, indicated the state of mind of the Namasudra peasantry, their readiness to reject Congress politics and to make the sheer strength of their number felt in favour of somebody of their own caste who had showed sympathy for their cause.

An analysis of the election results shows that, while a number of hard-liner Federation leaders were defeated, many of the associates of Mukunda Behari Mullick were successful. This gave him considerable strength in the Assembly which Fazlul Huq could hardly ignore when he formed his coalition cabinet along with the Muslim Leaguers and independent Hindus. As anticipated by many, Mullick was given an important portfolio, that of Co-operative Credit and Rural Indebtedness. This

93. 'Statement II: Detailed Statement Showing the results of election to the Bengal Legislative Assembly, 1937'; 'Statement showing the strength of various parties in the Bengal Legislative Assembly', Home (Constitution and Elections), GB, File No.R.35-27, A May 1937, Progs. Nos.1-13; Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the second half of January 1937, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.10/37; Mahananda Haldar, op.cit., pp.550-551.

94. Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the second half of March 1937, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.10/37.
infuriated the Muslims, as the other contender for this office was Suhrawardy, who had to remain satisfied with Commerce and Labour. In choosing between Mullick and Suhrawardy, asked the Star of India, "what criterion was adopted in giving to the Hindu the Portfolio which vitally concerned the economic salvation of the debt-oppressed Muslims"? True the problem also concerned the depressed classes, it agreed, and a Minister belonging to that class could as well deal with it. But was Mullick a true leader of the depressed classes, particularly when he had sided with the caste Hindus in the campaign against the Communal Award? So it was better if Suhrawardy and Mullick exchanged their portfolios. "This will satisfy the Muslims and the stability of the Ministry will be ensured."95

This acrimony, however, did not continue for long. Soon there was amity and the new ministry started functioning smoothly and effectively. But while the leaders made a political adjustment at the top, the Muslim and the Namasudra masses once again got involved in another fierce riot in the district of Jessore, around April-May 1938. The issue was once again trifling, but what was at stake was the honour of the community. The immediate cause of the riot, so far as it could be ascertained, was a quarrel over an all (landmark between two plots of land),

95. Star of India, 1 April 1937, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.10/37.
and an assault on a Namasudra woman by some Muslims, who were later convicted in a court case. Both the parties prepared for a revenge. The Muslims took the first initiative on 28 April, by attacking the Namasudras of Kullia in the Magura Police Station and causing injuries to some of them. The Namasudras retaliated on the same day and as the Muslims retreated, they celebrated their victory with beats of drums or jay dhaks. On the 30th, however, the tension mounted again and spread over to the neighbouring areas under Narail, Salikha and Lohagara Police Stations. Seven to eight hundred Muslims were mobilized to attack the Namasudra villages, while the latter, assisted by their fellow-compatriots from the neighbouring districts, also prepared to defend themselves. Spilling of blood was only averted by the timely action by the Police.

The Namasudra Association, however, promptly took up the issue and sent an urgent telegram to Mukunda Behari Mullick, then in Darjeeling, informing him of the "serious rioting" by the Muslims, plundering Namasudra villages and


97. Copy of Report submitted by C.I., Narail, in connection with the recent rioting cases of this district, Home (confidential), GB, File No.248/38.
endangering their lives. The steps taken by the District Magistrate were described as "unsatisfactory" and prompt action was solicited. The President of the Faridpur Namasudra Association and the Faridpur Depressed Classes Association, also sent a frantic appeal to the Governor "to stop the rioting without delay" for the good and well-being of the two communities.

On the other hand, the Hindu Sabha also seized upon this opportunity and made it a propaganda issue. Rumours were spread that temples had been desecrated and images broken and an Assistant Secretary was sent to the troubled area to conduct an enquiry on the spot.

However, from the 1st of May, the tension had started subsiding. Mischievous matbars and turbulent men on both sides were apprehended. Peace meetings were held, where leading men of the locality addressed the people to reestablish peace and friendly relations. But still the feeling between the two communities remained strained as each side was determined to vindicate their honour. Panic and mutual distrust prevailed as a

98. Telegram from President, Namasudra Association to Mukunda Behari Mullick, 30 April 1938, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.248/38.

99. Sasadhar Mandal, President, Faridpur District Namasudra Association and the Depressed Classes Association, Faridpur, to the Private Secretary to the Governor of Bengal, 5.5.38, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.248/38.

100. The Associated Press of India, 1.5.38, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.248/38.
result. A breach of peace was again threatened on the 3rd and the 6th of May in Narail and Lohagara Police Station areas. But route march by the Police in all the affected villages and the threat of posting a punitive police brought the situation under control. There was no subsequent disturbance, although both in Magura and Narail Sub-divisions, the Namasudra and the Muslim communities remained somewhat panicky, anticipating any time an attack from the other community, as did happen on the earlier occasions. The situation only suggests, that a political settlement at the top could hardly influence the affairs at the grass roots level, where the Namasudras as well as the Muslims were intensely conscious of their community-identity and palpably sensitive about their community-honour, which they were ever prepared to vindicate, with spears and guns if necessary.

The Namasudra movement, between 1925 and 1937, had transformed itself from a mass-based social protest to what may be called a 'politics of backwardness', when the elite

101 Special Report Case No.III, Report dated the 21st May 1938; Copy of Progress Report submitted by C.I., Magura, in Magura P.S. Case No.12, 29.4.38, u/s. 148 I.P.C. and connected cases; Home (Confidential), GB, File No.248/38.

102 Copy of Report submitted by C.I., Narail, in connection with the recent rioting cases of this district, op.cit.

103 Commissioner, Presidency Division, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, D.O. No.484C,6 May 1938, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.248/38.
leaders of the caste, by capitalising on the backwardness of their community, demanded from the Government such institutional concessions as separate electorate, government employment and educational facilities, which could hardly benefit the great majority of the poverty stricken, illiterate and cultivating members of their caste. But fortunately for these leaders, their adversaries, the Congress or the other organisations of the high caste Hindus, did much less for these unfortunate masses and were, therefore, further away from them. The Namasudra peasantry, as the agrarian disputes in Jessore-Khulna or the temple-satyagraha in Dacca or the recent riots in Jessore exhibited, were still imbued with a spirit of protest, still conscious of their community identity, still full of hatred for the oppressive high caste Hindus and, therefore, still ready to defy their social authority and reject their politics. The old symbiosis, formed in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, between the elite leadership at the top and the peasantry at the bottom was not yet fully inoperative. It had been strained no doubt, as indicated by the defeat of a number of hardcore castist Federation leaders in the election of 1937. But it continued nonetheless. As a
result, when the depressed classes' politics began to take a definite shape in Bengal as also in India, the Namasudras came to occupy the front position in it. Both the organisations of this movement in Bengal were dominated by the Namasudra leaders. And it was chiefly their leaders who represented Bengal in the all-India bodies. As the Government provided more and more special concessions for them, some of which even benefitted the masses, like the provisions for primary education, the politics of the depressed classes, now called the Scheduled Castes, took a confirmed loyalist and separatist stand. The Namasudras provided this movement with both the leadership and the necessary mass-base. The alienation of this vast community from the nationalist struggle, it is needless to mention, caused it incalculable harm. But that was the result of a much complex process, and it is futile to attempt to put the blame on any body in particular.