CHAPTER IV

CASTE AND POLITICS IN BENGAL, 1905 - 1937.
I

Under the impact of colonial rule, the pattern of distribution of economic resources along caste lines had started changing. But it had not as yet changed beyond recognition. Inter-occupational mobility was now a more frequent occurrence than it was in the late eighteenth century when Colebrook was observing the phenomenon. But even then, sizeable sections of the members of each caste could still be found in their hereditary caste occupations during the early twentieth century. The traditional higher castes retained much of their former control over the resources of the land. True, some new groups were coming up through purchase of landed rights. But normally it was not a movement from the bottom up. In the dichotomous vertical relationship between the 'rent-receivers' and the 'rent-payers' in Bengal agrarian society, we find an overwhelmingly larger representation of the higher (Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya) and some middle ranking (Nabasakh and jalacharaniya) castes in the upper stratum and a relatively greater concentration of the unclean and untouchable (jalavyavahariya or ajalchali and antyaja) castes in the lower stratum of that structure. These higher castes gradually extended this predominance to the field of education and consequently to the modern sectors of white-collar and industrial
employments as well. And so far as trade was concerned, here also only the members of the higher and the middle ranking castes who had already some surplus in their hands, could and did take advantage of the new opportunities thrown up by the foreign trading companies.¹

Thus the process of change in the material context of caste, that had started during the colonial period, was far from complete during the first few decades of the twentieth century. And it was this limited nature of change that made caste so important in secondary, and not to speak of primary, group relations among the Bengali Hindus. The disparities between castes were not new, what was new was a growing consciousness about them. This generated a spirit of protest in the minds of the depressed sections of the community and encouraged among them new aspirations to move up in social scale with the patronage of the colonial government, which had successfully projected itself as the new benefactor of such backward classes. No wonder, in an atmosphere like this, caste became a politically relevant category. Caste-consciousness, it is true, was never that significant in politics in this part of the sub-continent as it was, for example,

in southern or western India during the same period. Nevertheless, it had become a force to reckon with - and that too at a time when Muslim separatism had emerged as a viable political alternative to Indian nationalism.

However, it will be misleading to suggest that caste was not politically relevant during the earlier period of British colonial rule in Bengal. S.N. Mukherjee has referred to daladali in the early nineteenth century Calcutta, where caste played an important role. But during our period, these multi-caste dals began to dissolve into exclusive caste associations. All the endeavours to improve the social position of the various castes were pursued at an organised level and for this purpose, most of these castes had their own Sabhas or Samitis, while every ambitious caste had an organ of its own, edited by their educated young members. Their purpose was mainly to achieve horizontal solidarity within the castes, as well as to preach Sanskritization of their customs and reformation of their life-styles through their journals. In this way, those various groups sought to move up vertically


3. See Appendix IV.
as corporations in the scale of caste ranking and wanted to get that higher social position recognised by the census authorities as well as by the larger Hindu society. Not only did they try to improve their own status, but in some cases also endeavoured to impugn with *shastriya* arguments the claims of others.\(^4\) True, many of these organisations were what Lucy Carroll has described as ad-hoc petitioning groups that came into existence at the time of each decennial census, "to bombard the harassed census commissioners with memorials and petitions ....... and then promptly lapsed into somnolence, perhaps to emerge from dormancy a decade later."\(^5\) But some of them


were more permanent and better organised associations that sought to mobilize the masses in support of their movements.

By the early twentieth century, as we have seen, the cultural contents of each caste had become more or less similar, at least so far as the ritual ceremonies or social customs were concerned. The more blatant forms of untouchability and social disability had also disappeared. But emotional attachment to caste persisted; for caste now became the focus of mobilization for the pursuit of group or individual interests, as the disability of many of the lower castes was now mainly due to economic or educational backwardness. As a result, the caste associations which first began to appear after the census of 1901, rapidly proliferated after 1905, when 'protective discrimination' in favour of the Muslims became an established trend in British policy in Bengal. This generated similar hopes in the minds of the depressed Hindu lower castes, whose leaders now tried to carve out a place for themselves in the new world of institutional politics and professions.

6. Report of the enquiry made to investigate the desirability of appointing a special officer to look after the interests of the depressed classes in Bengal, Appointment (Appointment), GB, File No. 5M-114 of 1928, A February 1930, Progs. Nos. 7-20.
This is, however, not to suggest that these caste associations looked only to government patronage for the upliftment of the social status of their castes. The Mahishya Samiti attempted to organise a broader mass-based movement and called upon its members to become self-sufficient and self-reliant, both economically and culturally, and several organisations were started for putting together the resources of the community and to initiate a process of self-reliant development. Similarly, the Kshatriya Samiti of the Rajbansis also sought to mobilise the masses by establishing mandal samitis in every village. These samitis were supposed to function as village government, spread education and preach ritual reforms and also function as co-operative societies for the economic improvement of the Rajbansi villagers. By 1926, three hundred such mandal samitis had been established. The organ of the Kshatriya Samiti also continuously tried to help their peasant-members by regularly giving them practical advice on scientific agricultural methods. In the field of education, the

Rajbansis of Rangpur in 1911 volunteered to pay a portion of the estimated cost of the government hostel for the students of their community. Apart from this the Kshatriya Samiti also offered scholarships for the education of the poor Rajbansi students and by 1925 it had spent about Rs.10,000 for the education of 70 such students. With these students, a Kshatriya Chhatra Samiti was formed and its members were asked to repay their social debt by participating in welfare activities to help the poor members of their community. In almost the same way, though less effectively, some other caste associations, like those of the Sahas, Baruis or Sadgops, also sought to mobilize mass support through local level organisations and attempted at self-reliant development by patronising education of their members or opening co-operative societies for the better pursuit of their hereditary trade.


The Namasudras also organised village committees and spoke of self-help for the material improvement of their community. For the spread of education among their members, the Pods awarded a gold medal every year since 1910 to the boy of their community who would stand first in the Middle English examination in the district of the 24 Parganas—an example, followed by the Baruis as well. The association of the Jogis also tried to organise their members through local committees, made strenuous efforts for the dissemination of education among them, provided them with scientific instructions in the craft of weaving, their traditional occupation, and asked them to take advantage of the shift in popular attention to handloom, during the swadeshi era, for improving their economic condition.

10. For details, see Chapters V and VII.


12. Jogisakha, Aghashayan 1312 B.S., Baisakh, Bhadra, Aswin 1313 B.S.; Aswin 1315 B.S.; Falgun 1330 B.S.; Jaistha, Asadh, Bhadra, 1331 B.S.
But most of the associations, with their limited resources, were not in a position to cope with the immense problem of backwardness of the majority of the members of their respective castes. Hence naturally, they looked to government for patronage. In this direction, the Vaisya Barujibi Sabha perhaps went to an extreme point by desiring to have the Lieutenant Governor himself as their chief patron. The other associations, however, confined their efforts only to prayers and petitions. The Namasudras sent several deputations, one in 1905 to meet Sir Bampfylde Fuller, one in 1907 to meet Sir Lancelot Hare, one in 1912 to meet Lord Carmichael, another in 1917 to meet the Earl of Ronaldshay, and later, two other to meet Lord Lytton and Sir Stanley Jackson, to pray for state patronage, particularly educational facilities and government employment, to be extended to the members of their community, along with the Muslims. The Jogi Sammilani submitted petitions to government asking for educational scholarships and employment. Likewise, the Mahishya Samaj also entreated


the government to pay favourable attention to their demand for jobs, schools and scholarships. The Rajbansi Kshatriya Samiti also resolved, almost every year in their annual conferences, to appeal to the government to recruit them in larger number in the army and to start a Kshatriya Regiment for them, to nominate them in the local bodies and to extend preferential treatment to them in matters of education and employment. The Rajbansis were not prepared to be classified as a depressed class, because of the social stigma attached to that category. But they had no reservation about accepting special favour from the government, offered in view of their backward condition. The President of the Bangiya Karmakar Sammilani also complained of the monopolisation of the government executive services by certain numerically unimportant 'castes', 'classes' and 'communities' who were first to take


17. Kshatriya, Asadh, 1331 B.S., Shraban, 1332 B.S., Shraban 1333, B.S.

18. Rai Saheb Panchanan Barma, Secretary, Kshatriya Samity, Rangpur, to Dr. W.W. Hornell, Director of Public Instruction, Bengal, 5 June 1923, Education (Education), GB, File No. 2P-47, B December 1923, Progs. Nos. 939-945.
advantage of English education. Now that the other castes were also catching up, to redress the existing imbalance, he invited the attention of the government to the desirability of giving some appointments to the deserving young men belonging to the Karmakar caste. In this direction, materially prosperous castes, such as the Subarnabaniks or the Sahas, did not stay behind either.

In this context more important was, however, the question of representation in the Legislative Council. The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, by granting special electorate to the Muslims, had generated similar aspirations in the minds of many depressed Hindu castes, who did not have even the minimum representation in the legislative bodies so far. During the war there was a growing expectation that at the end of it more power would be handed over to the Indians. As the nationalists demanded self-government, the educated members of the lower castes apprehended that if more power was transferred, it would...


be monopolised by the more privileged upper castes.

The Justice Party in Madras, therefore, looked to the
British government for protection against a Brahman
oligarchy. The Namasudras in Bengal had taken almost
a similar stand. When the Montagu-Chelmsford Reform
proposals were announced, in a conference in 1917 they
resolved that if any additional power is "vested in the
hands of a few leaders without giving any share of power
to us it will make the future progress of the backward
classes impossible".21 A similar conference next year,
equivocally demanded "communal representation" to
safeguard "the interests of so many different castes"
and to prevent "the oligarchy of a handful of limited
castes". The resolution was also endorsed by the leaders
of certain other backward castes, such as the Pods,
Rajbansis and the Kapalis.22

Similar demands were being voiced from other
quarters as well, and that too since the days of the
elections held under the earlier constitutional reforms
of 1909. On 15 October 1912, under the heading 'The
Legislative Council', the Nayak, a Calcutta paper,


22. The Statesman, 5 November 1918.
had made a number of suggestions, in view of the forthcoming election of the members of the Bengal Legislative Council. In the opinion of the paper, the real representatives of Hindu society found no place in the Legislative Councils; it was only a section of the English-educated babus that got themselves elected. Since caste distinctions had no chance of ever being removed in future, much discontent would have been, therefore, removed, if the elections to the Legislative Councils were made on the basis of caste. "Thus", as it observed, "the importance and the influence of the upstart Babus will be gone. The English-educated Babus are at heart opposed to any increase of influence of the Hindu masses; for they know that that means the loss of their own influence. If the Government wants to destroy the sham agitation in this country, if it wants to root out discontent, let it elect members to the Council on the basis of caste, religion and numerical strength." 23

As a result of these public demands, the Government of India Act of 1919 formally recognised the special needs of the depressed classes by providing for the nomination of one representative from them to the

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23. Report on Newspapers and Periodicals in Bengal for the week ending 26 October 1912.
Bengal Legislative Council. A larger nominated representation was not found necessary, as we have already seen, because it was expected that numerically larger castes, such as the Mahishyas and the Namasudras, would be able to capture some more seats through general election. But the experience of the elections between 1921 and 1930, as alleged by the leaders of the depressed classes, showed that it was not number that was important for securing representation to the legislature. The depressed lower castes, although numerically strong, could not freely exercise their voting rights, because of their illiteracy, the influence of the landlords and money-lenders coupled with religious interference. In the first election in 1921, only nine of their candidates were elected; in 1923 seven, in 1925 four and in 1929 only five such candidates could get through the elections. In the 1930 by-election, which was held as the Swarajists came out of the Council and which was boycotted by the Congress, only six depressed classes' candidates could successfully get through the elections, while a number of their prominent leaders were defeated, as in the previous elections, in spite of the considerable support they enjoyed through their caste associations.24 In all the districts

with more than 50 percent depressed classes population, the elected candidates, if Hindu, belonged to the three traditional upper castes. And those few depressed classes' candidates who went to the legislature, were either Rajbansi or Namasudra, the two most articulate castes, the Mahishyas being no longer regarded as a depressed class. There were six Tilis among these candidates, four were elected in 1921, and one each in the other years. But of them, Upendra Lal Roy Bahadur (1921), Ranjit Pal Chowdhuri (1929) and Maharaja Srish Chandra Nandi (1926, 1930) were substantial landlords and thus did not truly represent the interests of the depressed classes. So was Prasanna Deb Raikat, the rich Rajbansi zamindar of Jalpaiguri, who won all the elections from 1921 to 1930. Among the other successful candidates, Hem Chandra Naskar (Pod), Hosseini Raut (Dosadh) and Mohini Mohan Das (Namasudra) were elected through Congress support and, therefore, had no connection with the depressed classes' movement. Thus the number of 'real' representatives of these classes including the nominated members in the Bengal legislature was really small: 3 Tilis, 2 Namasudras, 1 Chamar and 1 Rajbansi in 1921; 2 Rajbansis, 1 Tili and 1 Dhoba in 1923; 1 Rajbansi and 1 Namasudra in 1926; 1 Rajbansi and
Namasudras in 1929; and 3 Namasudras and 1 Rajbansi in 1930. In this way the leaders of the depressed classes continuously found their political aspirations frustrated by the politicking and electioneering skill of the high caste Hindu leaders operating through the organisational network of a modern political party. As the hopes of progress through political integration were thus belied, political separatism seemed to be their natural choice.

II

Many of these lower castes of Bengal, around this time, drifted away from the nationalist movement which in their perception, had come to be associated with the high caste Hindu bhadraloks, pursuing their sectarian or group-interests through this agitation. The Namasudras of eastern Bengal not only refused to participate in the swadeshi, non-co-operation or the civil-disobedience movements, but on a number of occasions and in different places opposed such movements actively. The Rajbansis of north Bengal, in spite of their occasional hobnobbing with the non-co-operators or later with the

25. Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No.1R-133 of 1932, A July 1933, Progs. Nos.20-21, Notes, pp.3-4, Appendix I & II.

26. For details, see Chapter VI, VII, VIII.
Hindu Mahasabha, remained on the whole loyal to the British Raj. The wealthy Saha merchants of eastern Bengal initially saw in the *swadeshi* movement an opportunity of improving their ritual status in Hindu society. They organised a Mahajan Samiti and decided to refrain from selling foreign goods in the hope of a more sympathetic attitude of the higher castes to their social claims. But soon they discovered that this only meant a curtailment of their profit, but not an improvement of their social status. Consequently, during the later years of the *swadeshi* movement, we find most of the Saha merchants dealing openly in foreign goods. This on the one hand, earned them *durbar* titles from the government, but on the other, made them targets of terrorist attack.

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29. N. Bonham-Carter, Commissioner, Dacca Division, to H. H. Veitch, Under Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal & Assam, Political Dept., D.O. No. 317 C, 26 September 1911, Home (Confidential), GB, File No. 181 of 1912; 'Political Situation in Bengal', Home (Confidential), GB, File Nos. 67 (1-9) of 1913, 9 (1-8) of 1914, 123 (1-3) of 1915.
movements, considerable tension built up between the loyal Saha merchants and money-lenders and the Muslim cultivators in different parts of eastern Bengal.\textsuperscript{30} The Tilis were more ambivalent in their attitudes. Their official organ, \textit{Bangiya Tili Samaj Patrika} published various articles which reflected the nationalist sentiment.\textsuperscript{31} But their leaders personally remained loyal to the British, even withstanding various social and economic pressures. In far off Rangpur, for example, the tenants of Manindra Chandra Nandi, during the non-cooperation movement, threatened to withhold their rents, if he continued to pay his revenues to government.\textsuperscript{32} Such ambivalence was also quite evident in the behaviour of the Baruijibi association which had initially started its life on a loyal note, but later since the days of the Home Rule movement, began to express sympathy for the nationalist cause, although many of their members still preferred the loyalist stand.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{30} 'Fortnightly Report on the Political Situation in Bengal' for the first and second halves of February, first and second halves of March and second half of September, 1924.

\textsuperscript{31} See for example, the issue of Jaistha-Asadh, 1334 BS.

\textsuperscript{32} Additional Superintendent of Police, Rangpur, to the Deputy Inspector General of Police, Intelligence Branch, C.I.D., Bengal, No.467, 12 February,1922, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.14 (21-30) of 1922.

Similar contradictions were, however, more conspicuous among the Mahishyas of Midnapur, who constituted about 75 per cent of the population and filled up all the strata of the agrarian structure in the eastern part of the district. While their caste association remained firm in its loyalty to the British, the larger Mahishya community, under the able leadership of Birendranath Sasmal, moved into the anti-imperialist struggle through the agitation against the Union Boards, established in Midnapur in 1921 and placed under official supervision, with an imposition of an enhanced chowkidari tax that affected the lower peasantry. By 1931, the combination of the different social strata which had been carrying on the movement for the upliftment of their caste, was transformed into "the broad front of the Congress for resisting British rule," the common caste identity of both the share croppers and the jotdars providing for additional means of effective social mobilization. But the Mahishyas since the late 1920's, as we have already seen, were no longer recognised by the government as a 'depressed class' and, therefore, were not entitled to special favour in terms of public patronage. Hence, with

34. *Mahishya Samaj*, Jaistha, Asadh, Falgun 1318 B.S., Paush 1319 B.S., Bhadra, Magh 1321, B.S.

more social surplus at their disposal, they had very little to lose by a rupture of relations with the British. But the other castes, like the Jogis or the Bhuimalis, much less prosperous than the Mahishyas, but with almost equally high social ambitions, could hardly afford to antagonise the Raj. The poor members of the Jogi caste had been for ever loyal, wrote their official organ Jogisakha on successive occasions. The social movement of the Bhuimalis of eastern Bengal in the early years of the twentieth century, inspite of the best efforts of the swadeshi leaders, could not be incorporated into the mainstream of nationalist politics.

It will be, however, misleading to suggest that all these Hindu lower castes were opposing the nationalist movement and collaborating with the British merely out of a selfish desire for loaves and fishes, although such ambitions might have been present in the minds of some of their leaders. The glaring historic disparities between themselves and the higher caste Hindus, 36 Jogisakha, Bhadra 1321 B.S., Asadh 1322 B.S. 37 Memorial of Dagu Mali etc., members of the depressed class called Bhumi-Malis, in the Sub-division of Tangail, to the Lieutenant-Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 24 April 1910, Home (Political), GI, B October 1910, Prog. No.14; 'Report on the political situation in Eastern Bengal and Assam for the month of November 1910', Home (Political), GI, A December 1910, Prog. No.60.
in terms of economic achievement and social status, and
the recent official policy of protecting the interests
of the under-privileged lower castes against the uneven
competition from the better-privileged upper castes,
brought them sentimentally closer to the Raj. But this
attachment was based on a different perception of history
and a different attitude to colonial regime, vis-a-vis
those of the nationalists. As the nationalists portrayed
the establishment of the colonial rule as a break with a
glorious past, the lower caste people considered the new
regime to be an improvement over that past. The new era
seemed to be pregnant with new possibilities, particularly
that of permanent elimination of the age-old disparities,
discriminations and disabilities. "God has placed the
Englishmen on the throne of this fallen country as its
devine ordainer of destiny", observed Mahishya Samaj in
1911. "There is no more the casteism or communalism of
the middle ages", wrote Kshatriya in 1920; "God has
dispensed even handed justice by placing the Indians for
their proper education in the hands of a noble nation from
far off Britain." There was no more "the jealous rule

38. Mahishya Samaj, Baisakh, 1318 B.S., English
transl. in Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Congress
Movements in the Villages of Eastern Midnapore,
39. Kshatriya, Baisakh, 1327 B.S.
of the Rajas",40 and "even the Sudras can now read the Vedas".41 Unlike the previous Hindu or Muslim Kings, the "generous" English made no distinction of caste.42 There is no longer the domination of the selfish Brahman, - western liberalism gives merit its reward irrespective of caste."43 In this new "egalitarian rule" anyone could aspire for self-improvement, as education and wealth had become accessible to all.44 Any political movement against this rule, therefore, appeared to be steps in historical retrogression, as attempts to put the clock back and therefore, against their community centric interests.

However, simple this perception of the nature of the colonial rule might have been, this was due not only to the government policy of protective discrimination, but also to an appalling lack of initiative, on the part of the higher caste Hindus and the nationalists, to do anything constructive for the social and economic upliftment of the backward castes in order to mobilize them in support of their political movements. Of course, there was no lack

40. Nahishya Samaj, Asadh, 1318 B.S.


42. Pataka (organ of the Sutradhar or carpenter caste), Baisakh, 1316 B.S.


of awareness about the gravity of the problem. "Their present degradation is India's open wound", noted C.F. Andrews in 1909.45 "Is it not obvious", reminded The Modern Review in an editorial comment in November 1912, "that if we had no pariahs, no despised or untouchable castes among ourselves, ....... if we could march forward in a practically solid phalanx, the movement for the betterment of our international position would acquire a far greater momentum than it possesses at present?" It was hoped at that time that the reform movements and the philanthropic organisations would be able to grapple with this greatest unsolved social problem of India. In 1883, one such organisation named 'Native Philanthropic Association for the Regeneration of Pariahs in Southern India' was started at Bangalore; a few years later in 1906, Bithalram Sindhe established in Bombay, the 'Depressed Classes Mission Society of India'. In Bengal, the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, established by Sibnath Shastri, was the first organisation to take upon itself the task of fighting untouchability and uplifting the social status of the despised castes. Under his initiative, in 1909 a

"Depressed Classes Mission" was established, which in 1913 changed its name into 'Society for the Improvement of the Backward Classes'. Its work was mainly educational and according to its reports, between 1909 and 1923, it had imparted literacy to about 45,000 people. According to its one time President, Lord S.P. Sinha, it used to run a school for about 50 boys at an abnormally low cost of Rs. 2 a month, depending mostly on contributions from villagers and the men who did the work of teaching gave their service in the spirit of missionaries. Apart from this most important institution, there were other indigenous philanthropic organisations as well, such as the Bengal Social Service League and the numerous day and night schools for the backward classes run by smaller and local organisations. But the work actually done by all these bodies taken together was really insignificant in


view of the magnitude of the problem and in comparison with the achievements of the Christian Missionaries and the initiative of the government. The shortage of fund was the main constraint that these organisations suffered from. The problem forced the Society for the Improvement of the Backward Classes to accept in 1918 a government subsidy which subjected it to close government scrutiny and the Society lost its independent character as a result. By 1922, it virtually became an agency of the British government, when all official grants for the improvement of the schools for the backward classes began to be distributed through this body. By 1924-25, the recurring government grant it received, far exceeded its independent collection of private subscriptions.

Apart from these philanthropic endeavours of a more secular nature, there was also a realisation that the problem of untouchability was responsible in a

49. L.S.S.O'Malley, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, General Dept., to the Director of Public Instruction, Bengal, No.569T-Edn., 18 October, 1918, General (Education), GB, File No.1G-33, A October 1918, Progs. Nos.17-24.


51. D.P.I., Bengal, to the Secretary, Government of Bengal, Education Dept., No.175/3P-5P-26, 17 February 1926, Education (Education), GB, File No.1E-4, B December 1926, Progs. Nos.306-313.
significant way for the erosion of the Hindu mass base, through conversions to Christianity and Islam - a fear articulated by Lt. Col. U.N. Mukherjee in 1909 in his book *The Dying Race*. Later, a Hindu Jatiya Shiksha Sabha was started with Mukherjee as the Secretary. Sarada Charan Mitra, an ex-Judge of the Calcutta High Court also began to organise around 1910-11 a pan-Hindu movement in order to counteract Muslim and Christian proselytism. The trend later merged into Hindu Sabha movement. The Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha had its first meeting in Calcutta in May 1924, presided over by Swami Avodananda. It preached elimination of untouchability, solidarity among the Hindus and emphasised the necessity of the Suddhi movement. Later in 1929, under the leadership of Swami Satyananda, it organised a temple-entry *satyagraha* in Munshiganj, Dacca, with the local Namasudras and held meetings in the interior to propagate against untouchability.


But ultimately, its ingrained high caste Hindu chauvinism, the attitude of offering charity from above and above all its well-known connections with the Congress, made it unacceptable to most of the lower caste masses and their leaders.

To many of the lower caste Hindus and their associations, the Congress seemed to be an organisation of the privileged higher castes with whom they did not feel any identity of interests. In deed, the Congress was all along dominated by the three traditional higher castes of Bengal. According to Leonard Gordon's rough calculations, among the Bengal moderates at the 1907 Surat Congress, 87.8 per cent were definitely or likely high caste Hindus, while in 1924–25, 69.4 per cent of the members of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee belonged to this same social group. During the Swadeshi movement, the leaders as well as the volunteers almost exclusively came from the same social category. Leaders like Ambika Charan Mazumder and Aswini Kumar Datta frantically tried to mobilize the Namasudras and the other lower castes of eastern Bengal and repeatedly promised to work for their social upliftment.

54. For Congress Connection of Hindu Sabha, see Leonard Gordon, Bengal: The Nationalist Movement, 1876–1940, (New Delhi, 1979), p.196; for an example of adverse reaction of a lower caste to Hindu Sabha activities, see Jogisakha, Falgun 1330 B.S.

if they supported their political movement. The issue was raised in different nationalist conferences at that time, for example, in the Bengal Provincial Conference (Pabna, 1908), Barisal District Conference (Barisal, 1908) and the United Bengal Provincial Conference (Faridpur, 1911). But mere empty promises, with social relations remaining unchanged, coupled with the absence of any concrete socio-economic programme, made the lower caste masses suspicious about the real intentions and motives of the nationalists. The movement, therefore, was identified with the high caste Hindus, being organised for furtherance of their own group interests and thus against the interests of the lower castes.  

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During the later period, there was no dearth in the zeal of individual social reformers close to the nationalist camp. Digindra Narayan Bhattacharya, a Congressite social reformer associated with Hindu Mahasabha, had started in the early years of the twentieth century a single-handed crusade against the evils of casteism and untouchability, even at the great personal risk of being socially persecuted. In his most acclaimed book Jatibhed, dedicated to the wretched of the society, he gave a clarion call to the Sudra jatis of Bengal to be up against oppressive

56. For details, see Chapter VI.
Hindu society and win over their social rights.57
Surendranath Banerjee in his review of the book in the
Bengalee, appealed to all "thoughtful men" to extend
their "helping hands to this young author and to see
that the indefatigable industry and untiring zeal he has
displayed in this work for the suffering and down-trodden
section of the community do not go unrewarded and
unrecognised."58 He himself took initiative for the
extension of education among the depressed classes, and
both in the provincial and central Legislative Councils
spoke for government patronage for such indigenous
efforts at social reform, while opposing direct government
intervention in such social questions.59 Other leaders
like Dr. Nilratan Sircar, Radha Charan Pal and Brojendra
Kishor Roy Choudhuri were also eloquent in the Bengal
Legislative Council for attracting the attention of the
government to this pressing problem of ameliorating the

57. Digindra Narayan Bhattacharya, Jatibhed, /in Bengali/, (Serajganj, Jaistha, 1319), pp.9-10, 131-134; also
see his Chaturvarna Bibhag, /in Bengali/, (Serajganj, Asadh, 1324 B.S.)

58. Bengalee, 26 June 1912.

59. Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol.46,
28 February, 1914, p.161; Extract from the Proceedings
of the Indian Legislative Council, General (Education),
condition of the backward sections of the society. But by doing this, they allowed the initiative to pass on to the hands of the government and thus unwittingly prepared the ground for the evolution of the policy of protective discrimination, that drove these sections closer to the Raj.

To most of these nationalist leaders the question of social reforms was perhaps much less important than the problems of organising a political movement for wresting more concessions from the Raj. Neither they could avoid this issue any longer. Hence in 1917, in its Calcutta session, presided over by Annie Besant, the Congress departed from its usual practice of ignoring social questions and adopted a resolution that urged upon the people "the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed by custom on the Depressed Classes ...." But in the same year, *Sanjibani*, a nationalist paper of Calcutta wrote: "If Indians have caste-differences, there are conflicts due to religion,


wealth etc. among Englishmen as well. Indians want the reforms advocated by the Congress and the Moslem League to be granted immediately after the war. They cannot be satisfied with anything less.  

However, the whole texture of Indian politics changed with the rise of Gandhi and the advent of the masses into politics. Under his stewardship the Nagpur Congress adopted a highly significant political resolution. In order "to establish Swaraj within one year", it urged all bodies "to settle disputes between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, and to make special efforts to rid Hinduism of reproach of untouchability." In a number of speeches also, Gandhi reiterated the necessity of abolishing untouchability. As a result, there was a widespread belief among some of the lower castes of Bengal that caste-equality was a principle of the non-co-operation movement he had launched. Gandhi's "charismatic appeal" is thus believed to have

62. 'Annual Report on Indian papers for 1917,' Home (Confidential), GB, File No.129 (1-6) of 1918.

63. Fortnightly Report on the Internal Political Situation for the Second half of December 1920, Home (Political), GI, Deposit, February 1921, No.77.

64. Advocate General, Madras, to the Government of India, No.80, 29 September 1921, Home (Political), GI, File No.303 (1-48) of 1921.
reached deep down to the bottom layer of the society, the tribals, the low castes, the landless labourers—all of whom began to show a contempt of all authority.” But they were perhaps expecting much more than the Congress leaders in Bengal were prepared to fulfil. Almost nothing was done in the direction of social reform and no major economic programme was ever undertaken. As a result, although the rich-Mahishya farmers felt no hesitation about joining the Congress, the political response of the ritually low peasant castes like the Namasudras or the Rajbansis was rather weak.

But then, the non-co-operation movement itself was withdrawn before it could properly take off. From later 1922, C.R. Das began to put across his ideas about Council-entry, which were accepted by the Congress high-command in 1923, and henceforth his Swarajya Party concentrated more on Council-politics than on broader social issues. However, before the election of 1923, Das could rope in two influential representatives of the depressed classes, Dr. Mohini Mohan Das, a Namasudra leader from Dacca and Hem Chandra Naskar, the leader of

the Pod community of the 24 Parganas. Both of them were elected with Swarajya Party ticket, Das from Faridpur and Naskar from the 24 Parganas, while the former eventually became a close confidant of C.R. Das in Council-politics. Apart from this, in meetings held in the interior, C.R. Das spoke eloquently of the necessity of organising the raiyats and removal of untouchability. And Mohini Mohan in 1925, pleaded for an enhanced education budget for the primary education of the depressed classes, for he felt that a "large part of the social body is lying inert from want of education and is frustrating by its inaction all our agitations for Swaraj." But the Swarajists on the whole, remained bogged down to constitutional politics, and as Atma Sakti remarked on 15 January 1926, "neglected the constructive programme". As a result, as the Anandabazar Patrika put it (16 January, 1926), the people were gradually losing all faith and hope in the Congress. For many of them felt that the Swarajists and the other Congress leaders had done nothing for their benefit. "On the


67. Fortnightly Report on Political Situation in Bengal for the first half of March 1924.

contrary", wrote Sanjivani on 24 December 1925, "they have done harm to the peasants and the depressed classes by their actions". As against this, concessions from the government had started coming in, in the shape of educational facilities and reservation in government employment. The nationalist press, almost in unison, condemned them, particularly the provision of communal representation in public services. Anandabazar Patrika (19 June 1927) thought that this would lead to more communal quarrel and inefficiency. On the other hand, the orthodox Hindu press, like Bangavasi of Calcutta, as a reaction to Gandhi's tirade against untouchability, had already started justifying it, as a legitimate method of self-preservation. When the Civil Disobedience movement started in 1930, Digindra Narayan Bhattacharya gave an open call to the depressed classes of Bengal to join the Congress, with the promise that the Congress volunteers would work for the elevation of their social status by accepting water from their hands. Already in


70. Ibid for the week ending 10 January 1925.

71. Digindra Narayan Bhattacharya, Hindur Nabajagaran, (in Bengali), (Calcutta, 1338 B.S.) p. 27.
1923, he had launched a similar movement for providing the services of the barbers (Napits) to the members of the untouchable castes in order to elevate their social status.\textsuperscript{72} But such gestures hardly evoked any response from the organised depressed castes, like the Rajbansis or the Namasudras, who expected to gain much more through loyal co-operation with the government.\textsuperscript{73}

III

By 1930, the depressed classes' politics in Bengal, with its loyalist and separatist tendencies, had taken a definite shape. In 1917 the All India Depressed Classes Association had been founded and its Bengal branch was opened in 1926 with Mukunda Behari Mullick as its President. Gradually through this organisation, the agitation of the Bengali depressed classes merged with their all-India movement. Around 1930, in the Executive Committee of the All India Association, Bengal was represented by Birat Chandra Mandal. In a meeting held on 13 July 1930.

\textsuperscript{72} Kedarnath Sil, Swaraj Sadhanay Narasundar Samaj, \textit{in Bengali} (Serajganj, 1331 R.S.), pp. 1-30

\textsuperscript{73} The Mahishyas, however, had already joined the nationalist camp and were active participants in the Civil Disobedience movement. cf. Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Congress Movements in the Villages of Eastern Midnapore, 1921-31,' \textit{op. cit.} Many of the Tillos and other trading castes were also financing the Congress movement at this time. I owe this information to Hitesranjan Sanyal.
at Simla, it "emphatically" condemned Civil Disobedience movement "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 this Civil Disobedience Movement with all their strength." The meeting also discussed the Report of the Indian Statutory Commission and "wholeheartedly" welcomed the announcement regarding the Round Table Conference, urging the government to give adequate representation to the depressed classes in it. It, however, criticised the Commission's recommendation of reserving seats for the depressed classes in joint electorates and concluded that the separate electorate was the safest method of returning adequate number of true representatives from this section of the community. The meeting also opposed the immediate granting of dominion status to India, as demanded by the Congress, at least not until the blot of untouchability was completely removed.  Soon after this, the Bengal Depressed Classes Association also had a meeting, which greeted the Statutory Commission's Report as "a masterly survey of the real situation of this country and its affairs", that made a "a proper and just note of the depressed classes",  

74. Reforms Office, GI, File No.163/III/30-R; also, Naresh Chandra Das, Namasudra Sampraday o Bangladesh, in Bengali, (Calcutta, 1358 E.S.), pp.52-53.
but criticised joint electorate as "positively harmful".\footnote{Ibid.} And the depressed classes representatives in the Bengal Legislative Council, in August 1930, voted against a resolution that recommended full dominion status for India.\footnote{Fortnightly Report on Political Situation in Bengal for the second half of August 1930.}

The first session of the Round Table Conference, boycotted by the Congress, took place in London between November 1930 and January 1931, amidst political turmoil in India caused by the Civil Disobedience Movement. Dr. Ambedkar, the representative of the depressed classes on the Indian delegation, though initially opposed to separate electorate, gradually moved towards it, as demanded by most of his comrades in India.\footnote{Marc Galanter, \textit{Competing Equalities: Law and Backward Classes in India}, (Delhi, 1984), p.31.} The All India Depressed Classes Leaders' conference, where Bengal was represented by Rasiklal Biswas, met in Bombay on 19 May 1931. It appreciated the work done by their representatives on the Indian delegation to the Round Table Conference, welcomed the decision of the government to resume its session and demanded fair and adequate participation in it.
so that the depressed classes of every province could ventilate their grievances and "play their part in the settlement of the political adjustments in the future constitution of India." Moreover, as the Congress had always neglected the political rights of the depressed classes, they should be guaranteed, the meeting resolved, "their right as a minority to separate electorate". 78

However, the very question of separate or joint electorate brought about a rift in the camp of the depressed classes in early 1932. The Working Committee of the All India Depressed Classes Association, headed by M.C. Rajah, in a meeting in February, deplored Dr. Ambedkar's demand for separate electorate and unanimously decided for joint electorate with Hindus, with reservation of seats on popular basis. An agreement was also reached to this effect between Rajah and Dr.B.S. Moonje, the President of the All India Hindu Mahasabha - the so-called Rajah-Moonje Pact. 79 The Ambedkar faction was also active and the Bengal group was with them. In May, about 100 such delegates met at Nagpur and adopted

78. Reforms Office, GI, File No.K.W. of 35/31-R.
79. The Hindustan Times, 29 February 1932, Reforms Office, GI, File No.111/32-R.
12 resolutions. One of them supported Dr. Ambedkar's Minorities Pact regarding separate electorate as the irreducible minimum of the demands of the depressed classes and another emphatically repudiated the Rajah-Moonje Pact. Interestingly, the first resolution, supporting separate electorate, was moved by Mukunda Behari Mullick from Bengal. The acrimonious debate continued, as in July another All India Depressed Classes Conference met at Bombay under the presidency of M.C. Rajah. It upheld the Rajah-Moonje Pact and resolved that the true interests of the depressed classes could best be promoted only by means of joint electorates with reservation of seats on their population basis.

Meanwhile in Bengal, the Legislative Council on 2 August passed a resolution that recommended joint electorate to replace separate electorate in the future constitution of India. But before this debate could go on further, the Communal Decision was announced, which provided for 10 reserved seats in Bengal, to be filled in

80. Leader (Allahabad), 11 May 1932, Reforms Office, GI, File No.111/32-R.

81. Eastern Times (Lahore), 12 July 1932, Reforms Office, GI, File No.111/32-R.

82. Reforms Office, GI, File No.173/32-R.
by the depressed classes, voting in special electorates. Caste Hindu reaction was sharp and bitter. They felt aggrieved as the number of seats open to them was much reduced and the separate electorate was likely to cut in a wedge into their political base. Several meetings were organised, the first of which took place in Calcutta on 20 August, presided by Narendra Kumar Basu, M.L.C. It recorded a unanimous protest against the Award which, it alleged, was "aimed at striking a blow on nationalism and national unity in the country." Another meeting was held in the Town Hall, Calcutta, on 4 September and was presided over by Dr. Debaprasad Sarbadhikari, the former Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University. It adopted a number of resolutions, one of which described the Communal Award as "of a highly retrograde character, as it has deepened the foundation of communalism and has also extended the principle in new directions contrary to all enlightened and democratic ideas of the age." 83

The depressed classes of Bengal, satisfied with the provision of separate electorate, were particularly unhappy with the number of seats allocated to them. However,

83. R.N. Gilchrist, Reforms Officer to the Government of Bengal, to the Government of India, No.1160-A.R.D., 16 September, 1932, Home (Political), GI, File No. 41-14/32-Poll.
in order to counteract caste Hindu propaganda against the Award, they also began to organise themselves. In 1932 an All Bengal Depressed Classes Federation was formed, which began to run parallel to the existing Association, the difference between the two being one of personality, rather than of philosophy. While the Association remained close to the Bengal Namasudra Association, both of them being headed by Mukunda Behari Mullick, the other caste organisations got affiliated to the new Federation.\(^8\)\(^4\) Under the auspices of the latter, a special session of the All Bengal Depressed Classes Conference was held on 28 August, with the Rajbansi leader Rai Sahib Panchanan Barma as the President and all other recognised leaders present. The conference resolved that the seats allocated to them were disproportionate to their population and pressed for additional seats to be guaranteed to them through separate electorate.\(^8\)\(^5\) In continuation to this, a delegation of the

\(^8\)\(^4\) Memorandum, 17 December 1934, regarding the Sunri Community submitted to the members of the Bengal Legislative Council belonging to the Scheduled Castes, Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No.1R-29 of 1934, A February 1935, Progs. Nos.1-15.

\(^8\)\(^5\) 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; R.N. Gilchrist, Reforms Officer to the Government of Bengal, to the Government of India, No.1160-A.R.D., 16 September, 1932, \textit{op.cit.},
Members of the Legislative Council met the Governor, in order to communicate their views on their representation in the future constitution. Apart from such organised efforts, at an individual level Rai Sahib Panchanan Barma in a Note to the government, demanded that "as an essential protection of their rights", the depressed classes or the Scheduled Castes as they were now being called, "should get seats proportionate to their numerical strength", which should be at least 27 out of 80 general seats. And "in the teeth of opposition by the people of advanced classes in a general constituency", he argued, the Scheduled Castes ultimately would have to "depend in the matter of coming to the Council on the special electorates."87

The whole agitation about Communal Award, however, took an abrupt turn with Gandhi's decision to fast unto death, unless the grant of separate electorates for the depressed classes in the new constitution was

86. Appointment, GB, File No.4D-18 of 1932, B January 1933, Prog. No.137, Abstract.

87. 'Notes on the Communal Award given by the British Government in connection with the coming Reform so far as it regards to the Scheduled Castes or the Depressed Classes by Rai Sahib P. Barma, M.L.C.,' Appointment. GB, File No.1R-90, B August 1933, Progs. Nos.870-886.
withdrawn. The arrangement, he believed, would result in a permanent segregation of these classes from the Hindu community. The British Prime Minister believed that nothing of the sort was likely to happen, since the depressed classes were included in the general Hindu constituencies as well; only they would receive, through a limited number of special constituencies, the means of safeguarding their rights and interests. But Gandhi remained impervious to all these official arguments, and the news of his decision, with its possible consequences caused great perturbation in the minds of the Hindus of Bengal. Meetings were held and public appeals were issued to launch a campaign against untouchability and to open the doors of the temples to the depressed classes.88

A meeting of the nationalists among the depressed classes was held at Town Hall, Calcutta, with Hem Chandrā Naskar as the President. It resolved that the separate electorate by segregating the depressed classes from the general Hindu community, would permanently stigmatize them and therefore, appealed to Gandhi to give up his fast and exert his influence to resolve the issue. Another nationalist meeting in Calcutta, participated by prominent leaders and celebrities, like Sir P.C. Ray, Nirmal Chandra Chunder, Basanti Devi, Nellie Sen Gupta, Ramananda Chattorjee,

Shyamaprasad Mukherjee and others, resolved that the government should immediately change its policy to save the life of the Mahatma. Rabindranath Tagore organised a prayer at Santiniketan on 20 September, the day of the commencement of the fast, to save the life of Gandhi and to provide moral support to his noble mission of eliminating the shameful custom of untouchability. An appeal was issued, signed by eminent personalities of Bengal, including Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Nirmal Chunder, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, B.N. Sasmal and Ramananda Chatterjee, to do away with untouchability and other evil customs which had given the opportunity to the foreign rulers to disrupt the unity of the Hindus. The Kalighat temple in Calcutta was for the first time opened to the untouchables in the presence of Congress volunteers led by Basanti Devi. Later, she also issued a statement, with an appeal to the people of Bengal, to take a vow on the coming Mahastami day, to remove untouchability and unite the Hindu community, and thus fulfil the mission which her late husband had attached great importance to and for which Gandhi was now going to give up his life.89

The crisis, however, came to an end with the signing of the Poona Pact and its acceptance by the British government. The end of Gandhi's fast was hailed with feelings of relief by the Hindu community in Bengal. The Hindu press in Calcutta welcomed the settlement, but did not attempt to analyse the details. Although the provisions of the pact were definitely prejudicial to the interests of the caste Hindus, the desire to save Gandhi's life was so great, that no responsible Hindu leader dared to express disapproval or protest immediately. But that was not the consideration of the depressed classes who decided to protest forthwith. On 26 September, two days after the signing of the pact, an emergency joint meeting of the Bengal Depressed Classes Association and the All Bengal Namasudra Association, opposed the Poona Pact, demanded separate electorate and held that the number of seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes in Bengal was hopelessly inadequate in proportion to their numerical strength.


of the Association, in an urgent telegram on the same day, communicated this disapproval to the Governor of Bengal. The next day, the Federation, in a specially held joint meeting of the leaders of the depressed classes, also resolved that "the communal decision .... creating special electorate to the Depressed Classes is a political advantage unprecedented and unparalleled in the constitutional history of India and the Poona Settlement is Dr. Ambedkar's political blunder ultimately leading to the political death of millions of people at the hands of the so-called caste Hindus". No one from the Bengal depressed classes, said the resolution, had authorised him to negotiate on their behalf. But the Poona Pact, as they all gradually realised, was a fait accompli that could not be undone so easily. Hence on 10 December, in an extra-ordinary meeting, the working committee of the Bengal Depressed Classes Association and the Central committee of the Bengal Namasudra Association decided to accept the settlement "as the next best thing for them." Later, Amulyadhan Ray, the Secretary of the


94. 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.
Federation, acknowledged in the Legislative Council, that they had also accepted the fact "by necessity", though "not by choice". 95

At the other end of the spectrum, Gandhi was not prepared to stop at the political settlement arrived at Poona. As a logical extension to that, he thought of "setting up an agitation against untouchability from within prison walls". To him an agitation against untouchability was more important than even conducting the Civil Disobedience movement, although he preferred to leave it to the conscience of the Congress volunteers to decide as to which they should place priority on. Personally, however, he believed that no civil resistance would be successful unless this "age long evil" was removed first, and the untouchables, whom he now preferred to call Harijans (the children of God), were integrated with the Hindu community. 96 His first step in this direction was to take up the cause of the Madras Temple Entry Bill, proposed by Dr. Subbarayan and in December, he threatened to fast if sanction to the introduction of the bill was not


96. Telegram from Bombay Special, Bombay, to Home Dept., New Delhi, No.5, 11 January, 1933, Home (Political), OI, File No.50/15/33-Poll.
Subsequently, however, he gave up the path of confrontation and requested the government "to facilitate the progress and passage" of the Madras bill as well as the Untouchability Abolition Bill proposed by Ranga Iyer, "in every way legitimately open to them."98

The first issue of the weekly *Harijan*, published under the auspices of the Servants of Untouchables Society, Poona, appeared on 11 February, its eight pages being virtually monopolised by Gandhi. Almost immediately, the Bengal Provincial Board of the Society was opened with Satkaripati Roy as its Secretary. Under its auspices, welfare activities for the untouchables were undertaken at different parts of the province from the beginning of 1933. Night schools were opened in Calcutta and in the districts, such as Birbhum, Midnapur, Jessore, Khulna, and Faridpur for the Harijan boys and girls. In Calcutta, efforts were made to repay the debts incurred by the Harijans to the Kabuli moneylenders and shops were opened in their slums for the sale of articles of daily necessity at nearly the cost price. The volunteers of the Society visited Harijan inhabitation areas in towns and villages,

97. Telegram from Home, New Delhi to Bengal, Calcutta, No.2881, 20 December 1932, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.2/33.

98. Gandhi to Viceroy, 1 February 1933, Home (Political), GI, File No.50/II/33-Poll.
to teach them cleanliness and sanitation, to persuade them to give up drinking and to provide primary education.

Along with this, anti-untouchability propaganda meetings were held in different districts like Birbhum, Midnapur, Jessore, Khulna, Rajshahi, Pabna and Faridpur.\textsuperscript{99}

But in spite of all these activities, there was "hardly any genuine interest" among the general people of Bengal, as in the other parts of India, in the untouchability problem.\textsuperscript{100} Hence, on 30 April, Gandhi announced his intention to undertake a twenty-one days' fast from 8 May, "in obedience to the peremptory call from within for reasons wholly unconnected with Government and solely connected with the Harijan movement."\textsuperscript{101}

After this, he decided to undertake a tour of the whole of India, starting from Delhi in December, then covering the whole of Madras Presidency, proceeding via Orissa to Bengal, Assam, Bihar, U.P., Punjab, Sind, Rajputana, Gujrat

\textsuperscript{99} Harijan, 29 April 1933, Home (Political), GI, File No.44/35/33-Poll.

\textsuperscript{100} 'Conference of the Commissioners. Draft of Memorandum on the General Political and Economic Situation in Bengal .........', Home (Confidential), GB,FileNo.689/33.

\textsuperscript{101} Government of Bombay, Home Dept.(Special), to N.G. Hallet, Secretary, Government of India, Home Dept., No.S.D. 2494, 5 May 1933, Home (Political),GI, File No.44/35/33-Poll.
Maharastra and ending in Karnataka in the end of July 1934.\textsuperscript{102} Bengal was supposed to be visited at the beginning of February and on that occasion a strong reception committee was formed with most of the leading members of the Congress as well as prominent members of the Harijan movement, who chalked out an active programme for Gandhi.\textsuperscript{103} But his movement does not seem to have aroused much enthusiasm in Bengal, for untouchability \textit{per se} was not much of a problem here. And Gandhi's crusade was only against untouchability which he considered to be a sin, but not against caste which symbolized for him a mere social distinction.\textsuperscript{104}

Meanwhile, what further contributed to the political alienation of the Scheduled Castes was the orthodox Hindu backlash against the Poona Pact and the untouchability removal movement at the beginning of 1933. This orthodox opposition to Poona Pact was mounting since December 1932

\textsuperscript{102} A.V. Thakkar, Servants of the Untouchables Society, to Birla, 7 November 1933, Home (Political), GI, File No. 3/23/1933-Poll.

\textsuperscript{103} Secret Statement of B.N.G. 3, 1 November 1933, Home (Political), GI, File No. 3/23/1933-Poll.

\textsuperscript{104} Government of Bombay, Home Dept. (Special), to N.G. Hallet, Secretary, Government of India, Home Dept., No.S.D. 636, 14 February, 1933, Home (Political), GI, File No.44/35/33-Poll.
when twenty-five Hindu M.L.C.'s sent a telegram to
the Prime Minister, reinforced by another telegram
from Satyendranath Sen, a member of the Central Legislative
Assembly. On 11 January, an All Parties Bengalee Hindu
Conference was held at Calcutta under the presidency of
Bepin Behari Ghosh. It requested the Prime Minister
to recall his acceptance of the arrangement so far as
Bengal was concerned, for it was "arrived at without
consulting any Hindus of Bengal" and the number of seats
reserved was "out of all proportion to the real needs of
the province". A few days later, on 24 January, a
delegation of six Hindu M.L.C.'s, led by B.C. Chatterjee,
met the Governor of Bengal and requested him to communicate
to the Prime Minister their disapproval of the Poona Pact,
which was arrived at in an atmosphere of "moral coercion",
Moreover, no responsible representative from Bengal was
invited, except Rasiklal Biswas, "a man with a certain
following among the Depressed Classes". And the net effect
of the Pact in Bengal, they pointed out, was "a reduction
of caste Hindu seats in largely increased House."  

105. President, British Indian Association, to the Private
Secretary to the Governor of Bengal, No.1325,
21/23 February 1933, Appointment (Reforms), GB,
File No.1R-28, A July 1933, Progs. Nos.1-5.

106. 'Notes of a Deputation received by His Excellency
at Government House Calcutta, on the 24th January
1933, at 12-30p.m., on the Subject of the position
of Bengal under the Poona Pact', Appointment (Reforms),
GB, File No.1R-202 of 1932, A January 1933,
The climax of the whole agitation came in March 1933, when Jitendralal Banerjee moved a resolution in the Legislative Council, which said that the Poona Pact "is unacceptable in the peculiar circumstances of Bengal, that it is injurious to the interests of the Hindu community of this province and subversive of their solidarity" and "therefore, the Prime Minister should be pleased to revise and withdraw his acceptance of the same so far as this province is concerned". The resolution was "eloquently supported by the other Hindu members, like S.N. Bose, Ananda Mohan Poddar and Naresh Chandra Sen Gupta and opposed tooth and nail by the representatives of the depressed classes. Amulyadhan Roy called it a "Brahmanical fraud", for the Pact was the creation of the caste Hindus "thrust" upon the depressed classes. He further announced that Gandhi, in response to his letter, had assured him that "the Pact cannot be revised without the unanimous consent of all the parties concerned". Mukunda Behari Mullick also recorded his "emphatic protest against the resolution". He objected to the contention that Bengal was unrepresented, by pointing out that eminent personalities like Swami Satyananda of the Hindu Mission, Haridas Mazumdar of Amrita Samaj, Pramathananath Banerjee of Midnapur and Satish Chandra Das Gupta of Khadi Pratishthan were present at Poona when the Pact was being negotiated. But in spite of all this, the resolution was carried by 36 to 27 votes, with all the caste Hindu members except Aukshay Kumar Sen
voting in favour of the resolution and all the seven depressed classes members and the Muslim members, with the solitary exception of Maulavi Abdus Samad, voting against it. Amulyadhan Ray later described it as the triumph of a "determined combination of the Zamindars, moneylenders and the caste Hindus against the depressed classes". The very fact that the caste Hindus voted on one side and all the seven Scheduled Caste representatives on the other, he argued, "showed the necessity of our special representation and the truth of our allegation that caste prejudices are being reflected in political matters". Hence, when the Local Self-Government Second Amendment Bill came before the Council, Ray demanded for the depressed classes the rights of a minority community and representation through nomination in the municipalities.

The Scheduled Castes of Bengal more and more rallied round the Poona Pact as a reaction to the mounting orthodox Hindu opposition to it. Rasiklal Biswas who had become the Secretary of the All India Depressed Classes Federation and claimed himself to be "one of the authors of the resolution and all the seven depressed classes members and the Muslim members, with the solitary exception of Maulavi Abdus Samad, voting against it. Amulyadhan Ray later described it as the triumph of a "determined combination of the Zamindars, moneylenders and the caste Hindus against the depressed classes". The very fact that the caste Hindus voted on one side and all the seven Scheduled Caste representatives on the other, he argued, "showed the necessity of our special representation and the truth of our allegation that caste prejudices are being reflected in political matters". Hence, when the Local Self-Government Second Amendment Bill came before the Council, Ray demanded for the depressed classes the rights of a minority community and representation through nomination in the municipalities.

of the said pact", pointed out that the "30 seats allotted to the Bengal depressed classes were calculated on the basis of their population ......." The Bengal Federation as a counteractive measure against the orthodox Hindu agitation, sent a deputation to the Governor on 3 August 1934 and organised public meetings at Bongaon in December '34 and at Jhenida in July '35. But meanwhile had started the classification of the Scheduled Castes for the electoral purposes and it added new complexities to the whole situation.

Some of the caste Hindus like Suklal Nag, considered this classification procedure as "dangerous and derogatory," leading to a "political caste system" which was "not reform but retrogression." But the main opposition in Bengal hinged on the criterion of classification, i.e., 'social and political backwardness' in the place of the untouchability test, being applied

110. 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.

111. Appointment, GB, File No.1R-59, B August 1934, Prog. No.448; File 1R-91 of 1935, B January 1935, Prog. No.490; File No.1R-166, B September 1935, Progs. Nos.100-102; Abstracts.

in other parts of India. Had this test been applied as recommended by the Simon Commission or the Lothian Committee, thought N.K. Basu, an M.L.C., there would have been "virtually no depressed classes in Bengal". The Bangiya Brahman Sabha believed that there was no caste in Bengal which was "of depressed political condition." The Indian Association described the provisional list of Scheduled Castes announced by the Bengal government in January, as "illogical and based on no principle", while according to Hindu Sabha, it defied "the application of all accepted standards of social backwardness." The caste Hindu members of the Legislative Council, like Bhupendra Narayan Sinha, B.C. Chatterjee, Jitendralal Banerjee and Satish Chandra Roy Choudhuri, continued their harangue with hordes of critical questions aimed at the government representatives in the Council. The questions covered various aspects of the classification procedure which were considered to be objectionable: about the justification of the criterion applied in Bengal; as to whether the views of the castes concerned were ascertained before including them in the list; or why certain castes which claimed

themselves to be Kshatriyas or Vaisyas were classified as Scheduled Castes; and why certain other castes were included in the list in spite of their explicit objections. 114

The question of 'objections' arose, because there were widespread protests against inclusion in the provisional list of Scheduled Castes announced by the government. Meetings were convened at various centres at which resolutions against inclusion were passed. Such meetings were widely reported in the press and largely signed representations were forwarded to the government. Such representations were received from the Suklis, Rajus, Kalwars, Pods, Naths (Jogis) and Sutradsars. 115 The Pods were, however, divided on the question, as there were representations both for inclusion in and exclusion from the list. 116 The Naths or Jogis were, on the other hand, united against inclusion and in view of their protest as well as their educational attainments, they were not


115. Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No.1R-29 of 1934, A February 1935, Progs. Nos.1-15, Notes, p.3; Appointment, GB, File No.8L-62, B. May 1933, Prog. No.419, Notes, p.3.

included in the list of Scheduled Castes. The Sutradhars also protested in unison against their inclusion in the provisional list and consequently their name was written off. So were the Mahishyas, as they were considered to be "sufficiently advanced to require no protection." The only major articulate movement for inclusion came from the Sundis, who passed a resolution in a representative meeting held at Calcutta, expressing their alarm at the rumour of their being excluded from the list of Scheduled Castes which they thought would go against their interests. And consequently, they were included in the final list.

However, most of the movements against inclusion in the list of Scheduled Castes, was due to the prevailing idea, that this would affect the social


prestige of the castes. Little attention was paid to the educational or political backwardness of the members of the castes and the necessity of securing for them special representation in the reformed constitution. The Association of the depressed classes also thought that such agitation were "only against the term 'depressed' giving a heinous and low connotation". But it was also the result, it pointed out, of the "mischievous activities" of the Hindu Mahasabha. In fact, on 20 January 1933, the Mahasabha had issued a circular to all the castes, requesting their members to protest against their being branded as depressed and if there was any representative association of their caste, to call a meeting of this body without delay and convey to the Government of Bengal the considered opinion of their caste association regarding this matter. The Association protested against such "manipulations" and requested the government not to attach any importance to such cooked up representations.

The Federation also noted "with deep regret that the Hindu

121. R.N. Gilchrist, Reforms Officer to the Government of Bengal, to all Commissioners of Divisions and all District Officers (except Chittagong Hill Tracts), No.1790-1820 A.R., 4 April 1933, Appointment (Reforms), GB, File 1R-2, of 1933, A April 1934, Progs.Nos.9-61, also Notes. p.10.

122. R.C. Roy, Honorary Secretary, Bengal Depressed Classes Association, to the Reforms Officer to the Government of Bengal, 17 February 1933; also the Circular of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, 20 January 1933, appended to the above letter, Appointment (Reforms), GB, File No.1R-2 of 1933, A April 1934, Progs.Nos.9-61.
Sabha is taking advantage of illiteracy and ignorance of the members of the depressed classes and misleading them to take off their names from the list. The Provincial Hindu Sabha was branded as "a sister organisation of the Congress" with "conflicting political interests with the depressed classes". The government was, therefore, requested not to accept their opinion regarding inclusion or exclusion of any caste.

The other problem that attracted the attention of the leaders of the depressed classes, was their weak representation in the public services, both ministerial and executive, although the Poona Pact had stipulated that such representation should be provided for. They raised this issue in the Legislative Council over and over again, and often they were opposed by the orthodox caste Hindu members. Mukunda Behari Mullick, for example, raised his complaint in March 1931, that "even when our candidates are qualified under the rules, their claims are superseded for reasons best known to the authorities concerned." Hence in a resolution, he demanded "proper provision for the appointment of candidates belonging to the backward classes", and his motion was supported by such other liberal minded members as Maulvi Syed Jalaluddin Hashemy, Keshab Chandra Banerjee, Santisekharswar Ray, Dr. Naresh Chandra

123 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, 4 April 1934, Progs. Nos. 9-61.
Sen Gupta and Narendra Kumar Basu. But Jitendralal Banerjee added "a jarring note" to the discussion. "You may show as much sympathy for the depressed classes as you will", he thundered, "but why should you show it at the cost of tax payer and the general public ....... and of the efficiency of the public services?"

The motion at last was defeated with 26 votes cast in favour and 44 against. But this was not the only occasion when the issue was raised in the Council. The other representatives like Rai Sahib Rebati Mohan Sarkar, Amulyadhan Ray and Sarat Chandra Bal continued to hammer the government representatives with questions as to why the memorandum on reserved quota for the depressed classes in ministerial appointments was not being properly implemented, or what other steps were being contemplated to provide for more appointments for the Scheduled Castes or to give effect to the clauses 8 and 9 of the Poona Pact. And then, in October 1934, the Association appealed to the government to revise its recruitment rules to reserve for the Scheduled Castes 20 per cent of posts in all public services - a request promptly turned down by the government.


Apart from this, the Scheduled Caste leaders, in spite of their pre-occupation with the constitutional debate, could not either totally forget the rural masses, who formed their political base and would give them support in the coming election. Hence on 12 February 1933, a meeting of the depressed classes held at the Town Hall, Jessore, adopted a resolution that appealed to "the members of the Bengal Legislative Council to exercise their vote in favour of the resolution to be moved by Maulvi Tamizuddin Khan for the repeal of the provision regarding landlord's transfer fee, provision regarding pre-emption and the provision regarding enhancement of rent etc." "The zamindars of Bengal", said Amulyadhan Ray in support of the resolution on 20 February, "should earn the goodwill of their tenants ........ and the other members .......... a character certificate in their favour for the future election by voting in favour of this resolution." In an almost similar bid, we find Rai Sahib Panchanan Barma asking for a government grant for the poorly equipped private hospitals in the villages of Rangpur, that catered "to the needs of a large number of people who are without medical help and many of whom might have died but for this medical help." But apart from these occasional public meetings and council questions,

127. Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol.41, No.1, 20 February 1933, p.44.
there was nothing more on their cards for the rural poor. This neglect of the masses and preoccupation with issues that hardly concerned them, had to be paid for later, in the election of 1937 that resulted in debacle for a number of sitting council members from the depressed classes.

As the election approached, the other political parties also made vigorous attempts to secure the support of the cultivating classes. For the Congress, the main propaganda item was still the Communal Award. A largely attended meeting was held in Calcutta in the middle of 1936, where the principal speaker was Rabindranath Tagore and which issued a Memorial against the Communal Award. Subsequently the Congress organised meetings in the interior, in support of the Memorial, particularly in districts like Nadia, Birbhum, Mymensingh, Chittagong and Tippera. The Hindu press lent a strong support to the movement and the signatories to the Memorial, curiously enough, included some of the die-hard leaders of the Scheduled Castes, such as Mukunda Behari Mullick or Rasiklal Biswas. But in spite of that, it evoked little response from the rural masses in general and the
Scheduled Castes in particular. In the elections, the Congress put up some candidates in the Scheduled Caste seats, but the results subsequently proved that they had not made much headway into this 'block of votes'.

Among the other political parties, the Muslim League was a purely communal organisation upholding communal interests. But the Krishak Praja Party, led by A.K. Fazlul Haq, was not a pure Muslim party, as it had a large Scheduled Caste base, built up for over two decades in parts of eastern Bengal. But the polarisation of Bengal politics between Hindus (represented by Congress) and the Muslims being almost complete, it decided to refrain from contesting the general seats. It also could not think of contesting the Scheduled Caste seats, as in that case it would have been difficult for it to withstand the League

129. Fortnightly Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the second half of July 1936, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.127/36; 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 & Elections), GB, File No.H.3C-1, B June 1937, Progs. Nos.110-119. The Memorial had nothing against the Scheduled Castes. It demanded joint electorate, which the Scheduled Castes had already accepted for themselves. It also opposed the reservation of seats for the Muslim "majority" by depriving the "Hindu minority". As it was wholly directed against the Muslims, Mullick and Biswas probably did not find it objectionable and put in their signatures.
propaganda that the Muslim League was the only party capable of safeguarding the interests of the Muslims.\textsuperscript{130} In other words, the Muslim League and the Krishak Praja Party became the two contenders for the Muslim votes, and for doing so, the latter had to abandon its Scheduled Caste base.

The primary election for the Scheduled Caste seats was held on 21 November 1936. It was orderly and without great excitement, as only 27 percent of the registered voters went to cast their votes, inspite of the unsuited timings, uncomfortable cold weather and the puzzling new 'symbol' system. But greater interest was stored for the general elections, held in January 1937, when the Scheduled Castes for the first time contested for reserved seats and 40.5 per cent of the registered voters exercised their franchise.\textsuperscript{131} Majority of the


\textsuperscript{131} District Magistrate, Pabna, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No.8788J, 30 November 1936; District Magistrate, Dacca to R.N. Gilchrist, Reforms Commissioner and Joint Secretary, Government of Bengal, D.O. No.10618N, 30 November 1936, Home (Constitution & Elections), GB, File No.R3H-4, A May 1937, Progs. Nos.126-138; A Brief Summary of Political Events in the Presidency of Bengal during the year 1937', Home (Confidential), GB, File No.473/37.
the reserved seats were captured by non-Congress candidates; in addition to that, in a non-reserved seat a Scheduled Caste candidate defeated a Caste Hindu candidate with Congress ticket, while in another constituency a Congressite Scheduled Caste candidate captured a non-reserved seat. Several eminent leaders of the Scheduled Castes and sitting members of the Council, like Amulyadhan Ray or Sarat Chandra Bal were defeated, while those who were victorious as independent candidates included such prominent names as Mukunda Sahari Mullick, Pramatha Banjan Thakur, Birat Chandra Mandal, Jogendranath Mondal (all Namasudras), Prasanna Deb Raikat, Shyama Prasad Barman, and Upendra Nath Barman (all Rajbansis). Curiously enough, Rasiklal Bhiswak came out victorious with a Congress ticket, while Hem Chandra Naskar won the election as an independent candidate. There were now altogether 32 representatives of the Scheduled Castes in the new Assembly and their political affiliation was: Congress 7, Independent 23 and Hindu Sabha 2. So far as the general composition of the Assembly was concerned, apart from the eight-fold political division, consisting

of the Congress (54), Independent Caste Hindus (14), Independent Scheduled Castes (23), Hindu Nationalists (3), Hindu Sabha (2), Muslim League (40), Krishak Praja Party (38), Independent Muslims (43) and Europeans, Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians (31) (total 248, two of them being returned from two constituencies each), there were also three distinct social groups (excluding the Europeans, Anglo-Indians and India Christians), the Caste Hindus, the Scheduled Caste Hindus and the Muslims. All these divisions had to be taken into account in the subsequent ministry-formation.

The Congress, with fifty-four members and with some support among the independent Hindus, definitely formed the largest political unit in the Assembly. There was a lot of speculation as to how the various groups in the Assembly would combine together and more particularly, whether the Congress would be able to align with the independent Hindus, Hindu Sabha and above all with the Praja Party to form a ministry. Such a combination would have had a clear majority in the Assembly. And there were also negotiations between the Congress and the Praja Party for the formation of a coalition government. But it broke

down on the question of priority to be given to the issue of the release of the political prisoners. Later, the events turned out otherwise and the coalition which Fazlul Huq was able to effect between the Muslim League, the Prajas and a number of influential independents, relegated Congress inevitably to the role of opposition. The eleven member cabinet that assumed office, with Fazlul Haq as the Chief Minister, included six Muslims and five Hindus. And among those five Hindus, two belonged to the Scheduled Castes: Mukunda Behari Mullick became the Minister for Co-operative Credit and Rural Indebtedness, and Prasanna Deb Raikat the Minister for Forest and Excise. Maharaja Srish Chandra Nandi also received the portfolio of Communications and Works. But the Tlis, the caste he belonged to, were no longer on the list of Scheduled Castes. The other two Hindu ministers were B.P. Singh Roy (Revenue) and Nalini Ranjan Sarkar (Finance). On the whole the new cabinet met with good reception, although there was naturally some grumbling as well. Particularly dissatisfied were the members of the Praja Party, as they secured only two seats, including that of the Chief Minister.

135. 'A Brief Summary of Political Events in the Presidency of Bengal during the year 1937', Home (Confidential), G3, File No.473/37; Two years of Provincial Autonomy in Bengal, Publicity Dept., Government of Bengal (Calcutta, August, 1939); Md. Enamul Huq.Khan, op.cit., Chapter V.
Some of the Muslims thought that too much favour had been shown to the Hindus, particularly because Mukunda Mullick had been taken in by disregarding the claim of no less a person than H.S. Suhrawardy. The Amritabazar Patrika, on the other hand, congratulated Fazlul Haq for the equitable division of the cabinet between the two communities.

The Amritabazar Patrika, on the other hand, congratulated Fazlul Haq for the equitable division of the cabinet between the two communities.

The process of the politicization of caste, in addition to religion, was now virtually complete. Caste was no more a mere socio-cultural category, but in every sense, an interest-group - a rallying symbol for the political mobilization of a large section of the Hindu community. In addition to inter-personal or primary group relations, now caste had also come to determine the secondary group-relations of the Bengali Hindus - the two spheres complementing and reinforcing each other. The colonial policy of 'protective discrimination' had borne its expected results. There was now a distinct third force in Bengal politics - the Scheduled Castes - mostly loyal to the Raj and separatist to some extent.

The caste movements in Bengal, that started in the late

136. Star of India, 1 April 1937, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.10/37.

137. 'Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the second half month of March, 1937', Home (Confidential), GB, File No.10/37.
nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, with social aspirations and a spirit of protest against the existing social imbalances, ended up in political separatism. The leaders of these movements gradually became more interested in concessions that could hardly benefit the masses whose socio-economic backwardness was ironically their major political capital. But even in spite of that, as the election results of 1936-37 show, they did not become totally unacceptable to the wider Scheduled Caste population. The phenomenon indicates the latter's alienation from the mainstream of national politics. This was partly due to colonial policy and partly due to the absence of any alternative social or economic programme coming from the nationalists or the caste Hindus. The net result was the estrangement of a sizeable section of the Hindu community, which weakened the freedom-struggle in the same way as the Muslim break-away politics. In 1938, the Scheduled Caste members of the Legislative Assembly founded the Independent Scheduled Caste Party with Hemchandra Naskar as its President and Jogendranath Mandal as the Secretary. 138

In 1942, Dr. Ambedkar organised the All India Scheduled Caste Federation. In its first conference held at Nagpur in July 1942, it was resolved that no constitution would be acceptable to the Scheduled Castes unless "it recognises the fact that the Scheduled Castes are distinct and separate from the Hindus and constitute an important element in the national life of India." The next year, its Bengal branch was opened with Shyamaprasad Barman as its first President. Thus was accomplished the political separation between the lower castes at the one end and the upper caste Hindus on the other—a phenomenon that had significant and longterm implications for the social and political life of the country for many years to come.


140. Naresh Chandra Das, op.cit., p.58.
PART II

A CASE STUDY: THE NAMASUDRA MOVEMENT