CHAPTER V

THE NAMASUDRA MOVEMENT I: THE BEGINNING OF THE SOCIAL PROTEST AND ITS ORGANISATION.
The Namasudra movement in Bengal is the story of an antyaja or untouchable caste, transforming itself from an amphibious peripheral multitude into a settled agricultural community, protesting against the age-old social disabilities and economic exploitation they suffered from, entering the vortex of institutional politics and trying to derive benefit out of it through an essentially loyalist political strategy. The rapid reclamation of the marshy wastes of eastern Bengal in the nineteenth century provided the hardy Namasudras with an opportunity to better their lot as pioneer cultivators, while previously they lived primarily on boating and fishing, in a region that remained under water for more than six months in a year. As the frontier of cultivation expanded in eastern Bengal, where the major concentration of the Namasudras could be found, they gradually emerged as a settled agricultural community, and the majority of them came to enjoy the status of the peasantry. However, they had among them, only a few landowners, for land in this area remained largely in the hands of the high caste gentry, which provided the capital, input for reclamation and therefore, appropriated the major share of the surplus generated by the extension of cultivation.
Nevertheless, their evolution as a peasant community, relatively better off than before, made the Namasudras conscious of their low ritual position and social degradation, as well as the economic exploitation perpetrated on them by the high caste Hindus. The tiny prosperous section, those few landowners and rich peasants among them, felt the pinch all the more sharply. The refusal by their caste superiors to recognise their claims to a higher social status, therefore, bred among them and indeed within the entire community - an attitude of defiance to the social authority of the higher castes, and led to the beginning of the Namasudra 'protest' in 1872. Gradually it developed into a well-organised movement for their social upliftment, as the growth of a Vaishnava sect, Aatua, exclusively among the Namasudras, brought about greater cohesion and solidarity within the community. The sect, hitherto unknown to the scholars on Vaishnavism, provided for an organisational framework, though informal at the initial stage, and brought about a symbiosis between the two strata within the Namasudra community. The relatively better-off leadership; that had given articulate form to the spirit of 'protest' in the minds of their poor and illiterate kinsmen, remained effectively tied with them through caste, religious and kinship linkages. Since many of them irrespective of their material condition, were the members of the same religious sect, there was greater diffusion of ideas from top to the bottom. As the relatively prosperous people became more
and more educated at the turn of the century, they began to aspire for greater patronage from the colonial government, which at least theoretically made no distinction of caste. This very aspect of the new regime made it appear, in their perception of history, as a definite improvement over the traditional rule of the discriminating high caste Hindu Rajas. Any political movement against this government was, therefore, interpreted as attempts to end this egalitarian rule and bring back the repressive social control of the higher castes. As the British in the early twentieth century recognised the necessity of protective discrimination in favour of the Muslims, it evoked similar expectations in the minds of the informed leaders of the Namasudra community as well. Their movement, also, began to change its content - it no longer remained a pure social movement, but developed separatist political tendencies as well. But the leadership could hardly afford to move without the community, for the backwardness of the community itself now became a political capital for them. Hence they justified their demand for institutional patronage in the name of social justice and could thus effectively mobilize the majority still boiling with a spirit of 'protest'.

These political tendencies became apparent when the Namasudras refused to participate in the nationalist agitation that followed the first partition of Bengal (1905) and actively opposed it on a number of occasions. Later on, they preferred
to steer clear of the non-cooperation and the civil-disobedience movements in the 1920's and the '30's. The political significance of this non-participation by such an increasingly well-knit caste group becomes clear if we bear in mind that they constituted the largest single Hindu caste group as well as the majority of the Hindu agricultural population in eastern Bengal. The nationalist leadership was conscious of the situation and did in fact make serious attempts to secure the support of this peasant caste. But success eluded them, as in this particular case, class contradiction had converged with caste hatred and together they created a barrier which the high caste gentry leadership of the nationalist movement could not surmount; more so, because on the one hand the nationalists could not offer any attractive social or economic programme, while on the other, the barrier was effectively reinforced by the British government which had been systematically giving concessions to this particular community in order to ensure their loyalty and alienate them from the nationalists. The Namasudra movement, as a result, developed two parallel tendencies in the early twentieth century. A 'protest' against the oppressive domination of the high caste landowning indigenous elite ran parallel to an unflinching allegiance to the patronizing colonial elite. And together these two tendencies led to the emergence of depressed classes politics in Bengal, with the Namasudras as its energetic vanguards as well as the enthusiastic rearguards.
II

The Namasudras, earlier known as Chandals, lived mainly in the low-lying swamp areas of eastern Bengal. They were most numerous in Bakarganj and Faridpur, as well as in the neighbouring districts of Jessore and Khulna in the east and Dacca and Mymensingh in the North. In 1881, 71 percent of the Namasudras of Bengal Proper lived in these six districts. In 1901, this proportion stood at 75.18 per cent. However, to be more precise, the principal concentration of this caste population could be found in the marshy areas of north and west Bakarganj and south Faridpur, and the adjoining areas of Narail and Magura subdivisions in Jessore, as well as Sadar and Bagerhat subdivisions in Khulna. These four districts contained more than half of the entire Bengali Namasudra population - 51.64 per cent in 1881 and 54.15 per cent in 1901. And, therefore, this region may be defined, for the convenience of our study, as the principal Namasudra inhabitation zone. Further west, however, their number diminished rapidly.

Among the Hindus of this region, the Namasudras or Chandals occupied a very low social position and were considered as untouchables. Originally a tribe, this community dwelt in this region before the formation of the Brahmanical social order. Later on, however, they entered the fold of Hinduism, imitated the Hindu social organisation and thus hardened into a caste. But this Hinduisation possibly took place at a comparatively late period, when the caste system had taken its fully developed shape and outsiders were admitted reluctantly and only at the bottom of the structure. This explains, to a large extent, the social degradations the Chandals were subjected to. The Sanskrit scholars despised them as an outcaste and helot people, performing menial duties for the Brahmans and described them as antebasi or those who lived on the outskirts of the cities. Manu branded them as the "lowest of mankind", who sprang from the illicit union of a Sudra man and a Brahman woman, and whose touch defiles the pure. Their social position does not seem to have improved at all even during the Muslim period, as Abul Fazal in the sixteenth century referred to them as "vile wretches".  

Coming to the more modern period, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we find that a sizeable section among the Namasudras had embraced either Islam or Christianity to avoid the stigma of untouchability. Those who remained within the fold of the Hindu society were still held to pollute by their touch. The barbers, washermen and sometimes even the scavengers refused their services to them, and for officiating in their religious and social ceremonies, they had their own Brahmins who were disparagingly called Bara Brahman or Chandaler Brahman and were not received on equal terms by the other members of the priestly caste. In the social feasts, they were required to sit separately and sometimes clear up their own dishes. The Chandals, it thus appears, were not allowed by Hindu society to enjoy any social privilege whatsoever, since the earliest times when they first came within its fold.

So far as the internal organisation of the caste is concerned, it was divided into a number of endogamous sub-castes. There were about twelve sub-castes among the


Chandals of eastern Bengal, six in central and eleven in western Bengal. Most of these sub-castes were formed on the basis of real or supposed specialisation in occupation. Each had its place in a graded scale of ranking which had regional variations. The Halwahs or the cultivators in general claimed precedence over all others. Each sub-caste had its own panchayat or administration which governed the rules of endogamy as well as the norms of social and ritual behaviour of its members. Commensality between the members of different sub-castes was in many areas strictly restricted. The Chandals of Khulna perhaps offered a notable exception to this general rule. For in this district, not merely was the restriction on commensality ignored, but even intermarriage was allowed between different sections. However, when the Namasudra movement started, much effort was directed towards the elimination of these sectional differences to achieve a

6. Ibid., Vol.I, pp.185-186
7. N.D. Beatson Bell, Magistrate of Backergunge, to the Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal, No.1103G, 7 October, 1901; also, N. Bonham Carter, Magistrate of Nymensingh, to the Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal, No.493G, 26 March 1902, Risley Collection, Roll No.3.
8. H.W.Seroop, Offg. Magistrate of Khulna, to the Superintendent of Census Operations, Bengal, No.2918, 16 October, 1901, Risley Collection, Roll No.3.
horizontal solidarity among the members of the entire caste.
The Namasudra leaders had their first conference in Khulna in 1881, where they stressed the need of unity and caste-consciousness as first steps towards social improvement. But the fact that forty years later, another Namasudra leader had to repeat the same thing in his book, indicates the survival of sectional differences within the caste, in spite of the efforts of its leaders. But some kind of a working solidarity had also been achieved. The internal differences disappeared, as it seems, when the caste as a whole was in confrontation with the outer world and this solidarity was to a great extent the result of an identity of economic interests shared by the majority of the Namasudra community.

The low social position of the Namasudras, in almost all parts of Bengal, coincided with their inferior economic status vis-a-vis the men of the higher castes. Although their traditional occupation was boating and cultivation, they could actually be found in various kinds of professions. They were employed as shopkeepers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, oilmen, fishermen, clubmen etc.

9. Mahananda Maldar, Sri Sri Guruachand Charit, [In Bengali], (Calcutta, 1949), pp.119-120.
At the beginning of the twentieth century, many of them were industrial workers (about 7.20% of the actual workers), some were traders, and a few were in the higher professions. But the majority of them lived on agriculture—as the census statistics of 1911 show, as much as 77.94% per cent of those who had some occupation were associated with it. And in this sense it won't be wrong to call it an agrarian caste. But more appropriately, perhaps, it should be called a peasant caste. For among this Namasudra agricultural population, only 1.15 per cent were in the rent-receiving category, 3.56 per cent were field labourers, wood-cutters etc. and therefore, about 95.71 per cent approximately, were tenant-farmers, enjoying the status of either occupancy or non-occupancy raiyat. However, only a few, probably had any significant amount of land at their disposal. 12

The rapid reclamation of the swamps and forests of eastern Bengal transformed the Namasudras into a predominantly cultivating community. But since capital input for reclamation...
came from the *bhadralok* gentry, land-owning was largely monopolised by them, mainly by the higher caste Hindus, Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya, and the high class Muslims. The majority of the zamindars, independent talukdars and intermediary tenure-holders came from their rank. In 1911, for example, in the three eastern Bengal divisions, Dacca, Rajshahi and Chittagong for which detailed break-up is available, 80.82 per cent of the 'rent-receivers' belonged to these social groups, while Namasudra representation in this category was just 2.14 per cent. If we look at the Hindu segment alone, approximately 56.58 per cent of the rent-receivers in these three divisions were Hindus; of them 66.58 per cent were Brahman, Kayastha or Baidya by caste, and only 3.78 per cent were Namasudras. The tenantry, on the other hand, belonged mostly to either Muslim or Namasudra community. In Gopalganj sub-division of Faridpur


district, for example, where the Namasudras were most numerous, they held 38.65 per cent of the holdings, the Muslims had 43.62 per cent, while others only 17.53 per cent in 1925. Thus the fundamental class dichotomy in Bengal agrarian relations, i.e., between the rent-receivers and the rent-payers, had by and large coincided, in the case of the Namasudras, with the caste hierarchy.

The Namasudra peasantry, however, served as tenants mainly in the marshy or the forest reclamation areas of eastern Bengal, particularly in Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna. Gasterrell's report of 1868 on the geographical conditions of Bakarganj, Faridpur and Jessore shows that the process of reclamation had been progressing steadily since the days of Rennell's surveys of these areas. Rennell's map shows that in the years 1764 to 1772 very little land had been brought under cultivation, either over the marsh tracts or to the south between them and the Sunderbans, where the major concentration of the Namasudras could actually be found. But since then the marshes were "being fast converted into first-rate rice lands". And by

1868, a little less than 50 per cent of the entire land area of the Sundarbans had been assigned under clearance leases to grantees, who had already cleared and brought under cultivation more than 30 per cent of it. 16 If we look at the particular situation of the districts where the Namasudras were most numerous, in Bakarganj, for example, forest was rapidly retreating before the axe of the colonists and the level of the marshes of bils was continuously rising from the annual deposit of silt and their size was, therefore, shrinking as the edges were being brought under cultivation. The construction of the road from Palardi to Ambula, in the heart of the bils in Gournadi thana, opened up the marshes to the cultivators and the colonists and brought many fertile areas under plough. As a result, as Jack had calculated, the extension of cultivation in this district had been phenomenal; in 1770, only 56 per cent of the land area was occupied, while in 1905, it rose to 92.5 per cent, the extension being most remarkable in the thanas where the Namasudras could be found as tenants. Paucity of information, however, precludes a similar calculation about Paridpur. Nevertheless, according to the rough estimate of Jack, the Settlement Officer of Faridpur, while much less than half of the district was

cultivated at the time of the Permanent Settlement, in
the year of survey about 80 per cent of its land area
was under plough. In Jessore, the proportion of cultivation
was most high in Narail (78.29%) and Magura (78.64%)
subdivisions, where vast swamps had been reclaimed and
brought under cultivation, and these areas, it is important
to note, contained the major concentration of the Namasudra
peasantry in the district. In Khulna as well, marshes in
the north were being steadily converted into rice-fields,
while forests in the south were being rapidly pushed back.17

In these reclamation areas, the soil was in
general more than ordinarily fertile and productive and
being liable to annual inundations, was continually renovated
by fresh deposits. In Bakarganj, the bil areas in thanas
Gaurnadi, Jhalakati, Swarupkati, Bhandaria etc., gave
excellent paddy crop when the water was not too deep. In
Faridpur, the marshy country was suitable only for aman or
winter crop, but produced very heavily. In Jessore, the

17. Bakarganj Settlement Report, pp.6-10; Bakarganj
District Gazetteer, pp.54, 131, 142, 164; Faridpur
Settlement Report, pp.4-5; Final Report on the Survey
and Settlement Operations in the District of Jessore,
1920-1924, by M.A. Momen, (Calcutta, 1925), /hereafter
Jessore Settlement Report/, p.13; L.S.S. O’Malley,
Bengal District Gazetters, Khulna, (Calcutta, 1908),
/hereafter Khulna District Gazetteer/, pp.91,93,100.
reclaimed swamp areas of Narail and Magura subdivisions yielded abundant harvests of rice. And in Khulna, the northern low lands full of bilis, because of the rich river-silt, contained the best lands for many varieties of coarse paddy and jute. In addition to this, rent was low in these reclaimed areas because of the favourable man-land ratio. In Faridpur and Bakarganj, perhaps the lowest rate of rent could be found in the bil areas, where the colonists had to be lured to an uninhabitable country where they had to fight continuously with nature to bring about the extension of cultivation. In Khulna, "privileged rents" were paid in the forest reclamation areas, by the original settlers and their descendents. And where the rent was high, such as in the swamp areas of Jessore, its burden was offset by the higher returns from the land. Even the agricultural wages were high in many of these areas because of the unhealthiness and the low density of population. As the Collector of Jessore reported in 1888, those who were


20. Jessore District Gazetteer, pp.82-83.
ready to engage for daily wages were much in demand and competed for and a large jotdar would offer them strong inducements to settle on his lands and would let them make their own terms. In Khulna, landless labourers were few and well-off, for there was a constant exodus of labour towards the Sunderbans where there was a large demand for it.

The situation described above does not, however, indicate a general prosperity for the entire Namasudra peasant population residing in these areas. For the average size of holding was rather small, being 1.39 acre in Faridpur and 2.51 in Bakarganj. The largest holdings, it is true, could be found in the bil areas; but even here, their size did not exceed 4 acres. And in Jessore, for which no such detailed information is available, the gross cultivated area per head of agricultural population was 1.5 acre, while the net area was 1.2 acre only. As a result, in many of these areas, particularly in Faridpur, the

21. Ibid., pp.84-85.
cultivators had to purchase at least a quarter of the rice they needed for subsistence. A general feature of this district was, therefore, the importation of rice, the price of which was continuously rising in the first decade of the twentieth century. Apart from these, there were other factors as well, affecting the condition of the raiyats. The very process of reclamation led to subinfeudation, an elaboration of the tenurial structure and the consequent pressure on the tenantry at the bottom. Fixity of rent was a rare phenomenon in the marshy tracts, where the frontier of the cultivated area had been continually shifting. And quite often, if not always, the peasants had to pay abwabs or illegal cesses imposed by their landlords. But what was most distressing to them was the growing trend, after 1870, of converting the low cash-rent-paying tenures into barga tenures and later dhankarari tenures, paying a high produce rent. The valuation of such produce rent was much higher than the previous cash rents and the Namasudra


Although they had among them a few rent receivers, their number being just, 2,612 in the entire western and central Bengal in 1911 (this broad area included Jessore and Khulna which were within the main inhabitation zone), the average Namasudra could not even perceive of land being owned by any one else other than a high caste Hindu bhadralok.  

However, towards the end of the nineteenth century a minority of the Namasudras had become prosperous, by taking advantage of reclamation of the forest and marshy tracts in Faridpur and Bakarganj, and in a lesser degree in the neighbouring districts as well. Sometimes the high caste Hindu bhadralok could not personally supervise the outlying areas of their estates, leaving the Namasudra and Muslim colonists in a better position to bargain for the security of their tenures, establish their actual control over the land and thus appropriate a greater share of the agricultural surplus thus generated through extension of cultivation. In the process, some of them achieved fairly comfortable status. A Namasudra big peasant or a cultivating-tenure-holder could not

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in Bakarganj or Faridpur or a Namasudra ganthidar in Jessore was not a rare phenomenon in the late nineteenth or the early twentieth century. 30

With the coming of Jute cultivation, these people who had already some surplus, made further profits from the high prices of the new cash crop. When Gastrell wrote his report in 1868, there was a widespread misconception that the cultivation of jute impoverished the soil and hence the raiyats selected only those lands that were annually renovated by the inundation deposits of the rainy season. Subsequently, however, the cultivators discovered that jute did not impoverish the soil to that extent, and consequently the crop was grown in larger areas, mainly in the marshy tracts, which were considered to be most suitable for this purpose, of northern Bakarganj and southern Faridpur, as well as Narail and Magura subdivisions of Jessore and the northern low lands of Khulna. These areas, it should be pointed out, fell squarely within

the main Namasudra inhabitation zone. The cultivators, however, could not reap the full benefit out of this new cash crop. They did not, as a rule, sell directly to the jute firms, but to the middlemen or byaparis at less than the market price. The marketing mechanism was thus dominated by the byaparis or dealers who collected the crop at local hats or by travelling in boats around the villages and appropriated the bulk of the profit from its sale. The primary producers were in the process deprived of their legitimate share. But as the price of jute was rising sharply and rapidly in the last years of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth centuries, till about 1913, it won't be fully unjustified to suppose a betterment of the condition of the primary producers as well, resulting in further prosperity for the well-to-do Namasudra peasants. And what is more important to note is that many of the Namasudras themselves could be found operating as byaparis or engaged in other forms of river-borne trade. Quite a few were engaged

in salt-trade of eastern Bengal, while money-lending became an additional source of income for many of them. Later on, young members of such prosperous families became educated, joined the higher professions and added further to the wealth of their families.

The available statistics, however, suggest that those who were really prosperous formed only a tiny minority within the entire Namasudra community and were definitely not rich enough to be at par with the high caste Hindu gentry or the Muslim wealthy classes. In the census of 1891, in the district of Faridpur, out of 1,53,628 Namasudras who had some occupation, only 57 or 0.04 per cent were returned as "Land Occupants, not cultivating" and 2,935 or 1.9 per cent as "Land Occupants, cultivating". Twenty years later, in 1911, only 0.89 per cent of the Namasudra earners in the whole of Bengal had any income from rent. But possibly not many of them had more than a hundred bighas of land under occupation.


34. Faridpur District Census, 1891, p. 13.

In the same year, about 3.83 per cent of the Namasudra earners were engaged in trade and 1.04 per cent could be found in the higher professions. But the all-encompassing latter category included varieties of professionals, ranging from gazetted officers, doctors, lawyers and teachers down to clerks, cashiers, and managers of landed estates. Therefore, to be more specific about their representation in the 'higher professions' in the usual sense of the category, it may be mentioned that they had among them only 3 gazetted and 187 non-gazetted employees in the public administrative services, 30 commissioned and gazetted officers in the public force and about 1,112 doctors, teachers and lawyers.²⁶ Twenty years later, in 1931, this caste could boast of only 17 gazetted officers, 767 non-gazetted government employees and 4,263 lawyers, doctors and teachers.²⁷ But in the meantime the population had also increased from 1,826,139 in 1911 to 2,094,936 in 1931. Improvement in absolute numbers, therefore, does not indicate any betterment in proportions.

It won't be, therefore, an exaggeration to say that these upwardly mobile sections were of relatively moderate means and remained in a true sense a microscopic minority, being even less than 2 per cent of the entire caste population in 1911. All the Namasudras, it thus appears, did not enjoy identical economic status. In course of the nineteenth century, it is true, there had been a relative improvement in the material condition of the majority of this caste population, in the sense that they had emerged as a settled peasant community, not definitely living at the level of starvation. Yet only a few had any sizeable amount of surplus in their hands. The vertical divisions among them were, therefore, not yet wide enough to produce class tension within the community. A group solidarity could easily be forged on the basis of a community consciousness.

38. This is an approximate calculation made from Table XVI, in Census of India, 1911, Vol.V, Part II, pp. 370-373.
An articulate caste consciousness cut across the divisions that existed within the Namasudra community and brought about a caste solidarity that had successfully absorbed, at least for the time being, the inchoate class distinctions within it. The small group of people who had moved up economically, were not yet strong enough to lose their social links with the less fortunate majority with which they were closely tied through the bonds of caste, kinship and religion. In the consciousness of the vast Namasudra peasant population as well, this group, which had risen from the same circumstances, was considered as an integral part of their own community, as opposed to the high caste Hindu gentry, representing clearly an outside economic and social control. By way of explaining Muslim communalism in terms of agrarian relations in eastern Bengal, it has been recently suggested that "Muslim rent-receivers, where they did exist, were considered part of the peasant community whereas Hindu zamindars and talukdars were not." 39 The same logic is perhaps

more appropriately applicable to the Namasudras. For first of all, the group of wealthy people among the Namasudras was much smaller in size than that of the Muslim rent-receivers. Secondly, the income differential between the Namasudra peasantry on the one hand, and this relatively more prosperous minority on the other was probably much less than that between their counterparts among the Muslims. To this may be added the fact, that the income and status distinctions between the Namasudra peasantry and their more well-off caste brothers were relatively insignificant compared with those between the former and the high caste Hindu bhadraloks of the region. For there still existed a gulf of difference, both in terms of economic status and social position, between the latter and the Namasudra big peasants and tenure-holders occupying usually the bottom of an elaborate tenurial structure. Even those who had been educated and gone into higher professions were numerically so small and socially, as well as politically, so unintegrated with the high caste Hindu educated community, because of their low ritual position, that they could not evolve a separate social identity or totally cut off their ties with the peasant society they came from. As a result, those among the Namasudras who had accumulated some economic surplus in their hands, remained closely and effectively integrated with the majority of the Namasudra...
agriculturists and successfully developed among them an articulate (sometimes even militant) caste consciousness that eventually led to a form of political separatism, when the leadership developed a kind of vested interest in the backwardness of the community and therefore, tried to mobilize it more vigorously for their movement.

The newly prosperous Chandals, in the late nineteenth century, had started feeling a large gap still existing between their recently achieved higher economic status and the continuing low social position. The paradox became more glaring in their eyes as they increasingly came under the influence of different heterodox religious sects. A large number of Chandals had embraced Vaishnavism which, at least theoretically, made no formal distinction between castes. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, the Kartabhajas, a deistical sect which repudiated idolatry and caste, also seems to have had a remarkable influence over the Chandals living in the swamp areas of Faridpur and north-east Bakarganj. In this area, once again, the missionary efforts to spread Christianity were most successful. All these religious ideas which preached equality of men, made the Chandals, the richer section

among them more particularly, conscious of the social disabilities they had been subjected to by Hindu society. This consciousness led to the Chandal movement of 1872-'73, which later gradually developed into a widespread agitation for the elevation of their social status, in the early twentieth century.

This initial Chandal movement started sometime in late 1872. It had no political significance at that time and was only "an effort made by them to raise themselves in the social scale among the Hindus." The immediate occasion was the sradd ceremony of the father of a well-to-do Chandal headman of village Amgram in Bakarganj. Members of the higher castes, at the instigation of the Kayasthas, refused to accept the invitation and dine in the house of a Chandal whose women visited the market places and who were employed as scavengers in jails for removing filth and everything unclean. A meeting of all the Chandal headmen was called immediately and the following resolutions were adopted: (1) women must not in future visit hats and bazzars; (2) service of no kind whatever be taken with other castes; (3) food prepared by all other Hindu castes, other than Brahmans, was not to be pertaken of. Their demand of equal treatment in jails between the Chandal criminals and criminals of other castes, was also duly communicated to the government
The organisers were alive to the problem of the poorer Chandals who were likely to suffer as a result of the no-work programme. Hence, as a safeguard, it was decided that their relatives should support them, and in case of there being no relative, the village community would do the same. But if, in spite of that, anybody refused to join the movement, he or she was threatened with social ostracism. To ensure participation further, it was publicly announced by beat of drum in the important hats, that it was the government which had issued orders for the observance of the above resolutions.  

As a result, the movement spread rapidly over a wide region comprising the swamp country south of Faridpur and north-west Bakarganj as well as the adjoining areas of Jessore. The epicentre, however, gradually shifted to the district of Faridpur and was located chiefly in Muksudpur and Gopalganj thanas.

42. W.L. Owen, District Superintendent of Police to the Magistrate of Faridpore, 18 March 1873, Judicial Department, GB, March, 1872, Prog. No.179.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., also, Magistrate of Faridpur to the Commissioner of the Dacca Division, No.340, 8 April 1873, Judicial Department, GB, May 1873, Prog. No.57.
So complete was the strike, that about four months after its commencement, the Magistrate of Faridpur, in course of his tour in the affected areas, found "the fields ... untilled, the houses unthatched, and not a Chandal in the service of Hindu or Mahamedan, or a Chandal woman in any market." The situation was so volatile in Nuksudpur and Gopalganj, that extra police had to be mobilized from the divisional headquarter for maintaining peace and order.

But during this time the movement was also showing signs of weakness, as the poorer Chandals found it difficult to sustain it any longer. As they returned, one by one, to their old jobs, they had to submit to worse terms than they had before the strike took place. Their main social grievances also remained unredressed. The higher castes still refused to accept food and water from

45. Magistrate of Faridpur to the Commissioner of the Dacca Division, No.340, 8 April, 1873, op.cit.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Officiating Commissioner of the Dacca Division to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Judicial Department, No.54, 14 April 1873, Judicial Department, Gil, May 1873, Prog. No.56.
their hands. And the government preferred not to interfere with an age-old practice of employing the Chandal criminals in conservancy duties in jails, although henceforth, they were only to be persuaded and not to be forced to do so.

After this first unsuccessful attempt to raise their social status by using pressure tactics, the Chandal leaders concentrated more on internal organisation for developing a community consciousness, more firmly rooted in the minds of all classes of their caste members. And this they tried to achieve initially through religion. Harichand Thakur (originally Biswas), coming from a Vaishnavite Chandal rich peasant family of Orakandi in Gopalganj sub-division of Faridpur, organised a new sect known as Matua. Being a more liberalised form of Vaishnavism, it repudiated casteism, assumed a congregational nature and acknowledged equal rights for all men and women. Initially, Harichand collected his devotees from among the Chandals of the neighbouring

49. Inspector General of Jails, Lower Provinces, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Judicial Department No.4470, 22 May 1873, Judicial Department, GB, June 1873, Prog. No.84.

50. Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Inspector General of Jails, Lower Provinces, No.523T, 7 June 1873, Judicial Department, GB, June 1873, Prog. No.87.
villages, who flocked to him to escape social degradation. The higher caste Vaishnavas refused to have any social interaction with the members of this new sect and this resulted in further solidarity within the latter group.  

In 1887 Harichand died and his son Guruchand became the new preceptor. He formalised the doctrines of the sect to suit the social needs of an emerging peasant community, and under his stewardship it continuously grew in popularity. The Matua sect did not accept casteism or the hegemony of the Brahmans. Water could be had from the hands of any individual who had a "pure character". No other social distinction among men was recognised. Guruchand advised his disciples to stay in family and perform the Garhsthyā dharma or the responsibilities of a family man. This family life was to be regulated with strict sexual discipline. Chastity of women and proper sexual behaviour by men were overemphasized, so that the Namasudras might appear respectable in the eyes of the larger settled agricultural community around them. But what is more important, Guruchand, unlike the preceptors of other monotheistic sects, preached a sort of work ethics, attuned to the needs of the day and requirements of a socially ambitious community. Educate yourself, earn money and be respectable, were his three principal pieces

of advice to the disciples. The congregational character of the sect was also retained. The devotees were encouraged to build temples of Hari in every locality where everyday they were supposed to assemble to sing devotional songs or Kirtans and worship the lord. No other formal ritual was prescribed for the members of the Matua sect, except this regular worshipping of Hari. But at this stage, as it seems, Hari, the lord and Hari, the first preceptor, had virtually been identified. On the whole, however, the fatherhood of God and Guru and the brotherhood of men, seem to have been the two cardinal principles of the Matua sect.

Gradually this sect attracted more and more devotees from the Namasudra population of Faridpur, Bakarganj, Dacca, Khulna, Jessore and Tippera districts. And the influential Namasudras, therefore, decided to use this religious platform for organising a social protest against their degraded condition. Guruchand with his overbearing control over the disciples, became the leader of this social movement and Orakandi virtually became its headquarter.

The first and foremost demand articulated through this movement was for the recognition of their more honourable


appellation 'Namasudra' in place of the despised 'Chandal'. Attempts at 'Sanskritization' initially took the shape of a claim to Brahman origin and fabrication of legends that sought to explain their loss of Brahman status in terms of evil manipulations of the Hindu Kings. Later on they began to 'appropriate' social symbols that had previously been the hall marks of high status of the purer castes. They had already forbidden their women from visiting the markets and refused to accept menial jobs and serve the higher castes. Now child-marriage and widowed celibacy began to grow in popularity. In 1911, 22.2 per cent of the Namasudra girls in the age-group of 5-12 years were either married or widows, the proportion being much higher than that among the traditional higher castes. And the śrādh or funeral ceremony was held, like the Brahmans, on the eleventh day of mourning.

54. The actual meaning of the name 'Namasudra' is uncertain. For details, see H.H. Risley, *op. cit.*, Vol.I, p.183, note 3; and Naresh Chandra Das, *op. cit.*, p.68.


But parallel to this, signs of 'westernization' were also discernible in their behaviour, because to the enlightened sections of the community, the reference category was not the traditional Brahman, but the high caste urban educated elite that had been talking at that time of various social reforms. Hence these people also began to speak about the evils of child-marriage and the lamentable plight of the widows. Many of them considered the Sarda Act (Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1928) to be a beneficial measure which would reduce the number of young childless widows. But above all, their yearning for education and later on political power within the existing institutional framework, were the highest forms of westernizing trend among the Namasudras. Harichand had realised that illiteracy and ignorance were the roots of all degradation the Namasudra masses suffered from and had, therefore, instructed his son to work for the education of the members of his caste. Guruchand, a farsighted man as he was, could also understand that in order to be socially uplifted the Namasudras must have education, for education begets wealth and without surplus wealth no


caste can move up in social scale. And he was realist enough to understand that without the assistance of the ruling authorities they could not hope to achieve this goal.  

The first step towards the spread of education was taken in 1880, when a pathshala was founded in Orakandi exclusively for the purpose of educating the Namasudra children. Later, towards the beginning of the twentieth century, fresh efforts were made in various other districts, sometimes with the help of Christian missionaries. But the progress remained slow. In 1901 only 3.3 per cent of the Namasudras were literate and in 1911, it rose to only 4.9 per cent. However, in this respect, they were in a better position than the Muslims, among whom the proportion of literacy was only 4.1 per cent. During the second

60. Mahananda Haldar, op.cit., pp.xiv, 100-102, 123.
61. Ibid., p.108.
64. L.S.S.O'Malley, Secretary, Govt. of Bengal to the Secretary Govt. of India, Home Dept.,No.Edn.7, 2 January 1917, General (Education), GB, File No,12-8, A January 1917, Progs. Nos.14-17.
decade of the twentieth century, the colonial government offered various special facilities for the education of the Namasudras in the form of special scholarships and free-studentships, as well as grants for Namasudra schools and hostels. As a result, literacy rate improved further. In 1921, of the Namasudras aged 5 and over, 8.5 per cent were literates. Some of these educated Namasudras also made their way into the new world of higher professions, although their number, as it has been already mentioned, was really very insignificant. One of the reasons for such slow progress in the field of education and profession, as the Namasudras believed, was the competition they had to face from the better equipped members of the higher castes. Hence they began to think that they deserved special privileges to make good the handicap they suffered from, as a result of centuries of social discrimination and economic exploitation. This bred a kind of political separatism among them and brought them closer to the British government. The educated Namasudras in this way began to drift away from the mainstream of nationalist politics and the backwardness of the community was made into a political capital by this upwardly mobile section, trying to carve out a place for themselves in the new competitive world of professions and institutional politics.

However, these well-to-do people, by using their caste and religious linkages and by speaking against the high caste zamindari oppression in the countryside, could successfully mobilize the Namasudra peasantry, already prepared to shake off the social and economic dominance of the upper castes. To achieve greater solidarity within the caste, a number of meetings to discuss different social questions, were held between 1881 and 1930, at different Namasudra villages and the Namasudra Hitaishini Samiti was started at Dacca in February 1902, as a formal organisation to co-ordinate the entire movement. The first of these 'uplift meetings', as they were popularly known, was held in 1881 in the house of Ishwar Gayen, a Namasudra zamindar of village Duttadanga in the Mollarhat thana of Khulna district. It was presided over by Guruchand himself, and was addressed by sixteen other local leaders from different districts. Self-respect and self-confidence to be promoted through self-help and self-reliance were the main subjects of deliberation and as a follow up measure, it was decided that such meetings should be held regularly. A series of

other meetings followed hereafter. The call to awake to the new day, and to take advantage of the widening horizon of opportunities thrown open to everyone irrespective of caste and status, the need of education both for boys and girls, the evils of early marriage, the plaint and plea of the widows, the new ideal of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, were the subjects that furnished material for several hours of speech-making. Attendance sometimes reached up to two thousand. Funeral feasts often provided the occasion for holding such meetings. The funeral ceremonies in prosperous households were followed by funeral feasts, where sometimes thousands of people were fed. And it became "customary" to hold a great uplift meeting then, before the people could scatter again to their villages. We find reference to one such meeting held sometime in 1910, in the house of a wealthy Namasudra, Ram Charan Poddar of Khulna, after the funeral ceremony of his mother. The meeting began at 3 in the afternoon. Speech followed speech, voicing their newborn hopes and aspirations. Evening fell, flickering oil-lamps were hung around the huge tent and the meeting continued well after 9 'o clock in the night. 70

But along with such informal, and sometimes

im_promp_tu local gatherings, more formal conferences were

70. C.S. Mead, _op.cit._, pp.12-14.
held periodically and in their Jessore Conference of 1908, it was resolved that the Hamasudra conference would be made permanent and yearly meetings would be organised in different districts for the discussion of their social problems and the spread of education. Village committees were to be formed in every Namasudra village and fifteen such villages would constitute a union. To supervise the work of all such local bodies, there would be a district committee in every district. To raise a permanent Namasudra fund, all such committees at various levels would be authorized to collect subscriptions. A handful of rice had to be set aside before meals in every family and collected weekly by the village committees. Every member of the village committees was supposed to pay a monthly subscription of one anna, of unions two annas and of district committees four annas. Three per cent of the expenses incurred in sradh, marriage and other ceremonies in every Namasudra family had to be donated to this fund. Apart from this, measures were also advocated for social reform. It was resolved that any Namasudra marrying his son under 20 or daughter under 10 would be excommunicated. However, to what extent this programme was carried out we do not know.

71. Jessore District Gazetteer, p.50.
Several factors contributed to the organisation of the Namasudras as a community-conscious group. In districts where they were most numerous, there were villages exclusively inhabited by the Namasudras. And here the matbars or the village headmen exercised absolute control over the populace and could instantly mobilize thousands whenever the need arose. The organisation of the Matua sect, needless to say, provided further opportunities for social mobilization and helped evolve articulate community consciousness. Local preachers, like Gopal Sadhu of village Lakshmikhali and Ramani Gosain of Khulna district, Bicharan Gosain of village Taltala in Gopalganj police station of Faridpur, Nakul Sadhu of Gazirhat in Jessore and Bipin Goswami of village Kenabanga in Barisal, gathered around them hundreds of devotees. And the Baruni mela, their most popular religious festival held on the last day of the Bengali month Chaitra (i.e. in June) at different places, most important among them being Oralcandi and Lakshmikhali, attracted thousands of devotees and provided opportunities for greater interaction among them across localities. A Natuakhali Ashram was opened in the district town of Khulna,

72. G.S. Dutt, Magistrate of Khulna, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No.929J-xiii-14, 5 June 1911, Political (Police), GB, File No.P5R-1, 3 July 1911, Progs. Nos.326-328.

73 L.F. Morsehead, Inspector-General of Police, L.F., to the Chief Secretary, Govt. of Bengal, No.363 P.B/316-11, September 1911, Political (Police), GB, File No.P32-34, 3 February 1912, Progs. Nos.43-48.
where Namasudra students, coming from poor peasant families, could stay and continue their studies. Later in 1932, the initiative of Gopal Sadhu gave the sect a formal organisational framework in the shape of Hari-Guruchand Mission, through which the upper echelon of the community could effectively reach the bottom.\textsuperscript{74} Ideas born at the top could thus easily percolate downward. And the preparedness at the bottom to defy the age-old authority of the upper castes provided those at the top with a broader mass base to organise a movement in furtherance of their own ideas.

IV

Never in the past, could the Namasudras fully identify themselves, socially or culturally, with the high caste Hindus. As the Muslims had already developed a social and cultural identity of their own and distinct from that of the Hindus,\textsuperscript{75} so did the Namasudras, to some extent, vis-a-vis the high cast Hindus. Exposure to education,

\textsuperscript{74} Maresh Chandra Das, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.16-17.

\textsuperscript{75} For an analysis of the emergence of Muslim identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see, Rafiuddin Ahmed, \textit{The Bengal Muslims, 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity}, (Delhi, 1981).
even of a minority, made them conscious of the social disabilities and economic discrimination, they had been subjected to in the past centuries. Colonial regime by contrast seemed to be more open and egalitarian. This created among them a different perception of history, in contrast to that of the nationalists. As the nationalists glorified the traditional past as something like a golden age that was lost with the establishment of British rule, the Namasudras considered the colonial regime an improvement over the past. For there was no more the oppressive and contemptuous rule of the Hindu Rajas and Brahmans so that even the Sudras could now read the Vedas. The generous English made no distinction of caste and offered equal opportunities and equal protection of law to everybody, high and low. Hence, in this egalitarian rule, anyone could have education, acquire wealth and rise thereby in social status.  

_Pataka_, a Namasudra paper published in 1916 a revealing editorial which stated:

"...We had been put to sleep by the blind Hindu Kings who ruled over Hindu society. To-day we have woken up from that slumber through the grace of the mighty British, who believe in the equality of men and not in caste ......

Any movement to overthrow this regime was, therefore, interpreted as attempts to put the clock back as endeavours to revive the power of the high caste Hindus and reimpose their oppressive control over the society. This consciousness, first born at the top, could easily filtrate downward, where there was already in existence a deep-rooted hatred and an attitude of defiance towards the authority of the higher castes.

This feeling of attachment to the colonial rule was also to a large extent due to the influence of the Christian missionaries, who had long been trying through their philanthropic activities to win over such depressed communities, the "human debris of India", as the Bishop of Madras described them. As the high caste educated people

78. Buddheswar Biswas, op.cit., p.31
79. C.S. Mead, op.cit., p.27.
dashed their hopes of an expansion of Christianity, it was "the pariah community, and not the Brahmin", that began to occupy "the position of highest strategic value" for such missionary activities. In eastern Bengal, during the famine of 1906, the areas which were most affected were the marshy regions of Faridpur and Bakarganj. The worst sufferers were the poorer classes of peasants who had no ploughs or land of their own and the poorer high caste bhadraloks who depended for their livelihood entirely upon a small patrimony. The Swadesh Bandhab Samiti under the guidance of Aswini Kumar Dutta organised relief work in the famine-stricken areas. But while the swadeshi relief fund, as it has been alleged, "was largely used for the benefit of the 'bhadralok' classes," the Christian missionaries both Catholic and Protestant, did excellent work among the distressed Namasudra peasants of the bil tracts, in co-operation with the government officials. This naturally brought the missionaries closer to the Namasudras.

But closest to them was perhaps a particular Australian Baptist missionary, Dr. C.S. Mead. The Orakandi school which had been started with humble resources on a


plot of land, donated by Guruchand himself, needed further financial assistance for sustenance, as the Kayastha zamindar of the locality refused to help. Appeals were, therefore, sent to Head, then stationed at the district headquarter of Faridpur. Orakandi being "the most influential centre of the Namasudra world", the missionary felt that "this strategic centre should be occupied." In a meeting held at Orakandi in early 1905, Mead promised to help and pleaded for a piece of land, both for opening a school and a mission. Although the elder Namasudras and their priests were hesitant and suspicious about the ulterior motives of this missionary, the leader stood firm, and himself donated a piece of land on which Mead started his mission in 1906, initially in a tent. Apart from teaching gospel to the Namasudras, with the assistance of Rev. H. Sutton, Mead also began to run a charitable dispensary. The elementary school for boys was raised to the status of a High School, where about 200 lads came to study from different villages across rivers and marshes. A day-school and a Sunday-school for girls were opened under the supervision of Miss Tuck. The Widows' Home at Orakandi, looked after by Nurse Thomson, provided shelter to a number of destitute Namasudra widows, while Miss Kamala Bose, a Christian Bengali young lady, started

82. C.S. Mead, op.cit., p.8.
working for the upliftment of the Namasudra women at
Gopalganj, about 20 miles away from Orakandi. All these
activities were made possible by the local support that Mead
received from Guruchand and his followers, which gave him a
strong base in an area predominantly inhabited by the members
of a disgruntled but ambitious untouchable caste. Before
his departure from India, Mead, therefore, openly acknowledged:
"In the various activities of my missionary life
he [Guruchand], has made possible many things
that without his backing could not have been
carried through ...." 85

Expression of gratitude was, however, reciprocal. As a
Namasudra paper put it, "....the Christians [are] lifting
the rock from off us, and we are getting a chance to rise,
but we do not know how to express the gratitude we so deeply
feel." 86 But as Mead realised, the Namasudras had only
learnt to "lift up their heads", but refused to "turn their
heads to behold the Lamp of God and then ...... to bow their
heads in living and lowly homage at His pierced feet." 87

84. C.S. Mead, op.cit., pp.9, 11,14,17,22,62, 116, 123.
85. Quoted in Naresh Chandra Das, op.cit., p.35; also
C.S. Mead, op.cit., p.9.
86. Quoted in C.S. Mead, op.cit., p.110; also see Rashbehari
Ray, op.cit., p.155.
87. C.S. Mead, op.cit., p.76. Italics original.
The Faridpur Mission could convert only two Namasudra families before 1911. And this goes to show, as Rev. Sutton pointed out, the Namasudras "imbibe just so much of the Christian spirit as ....... would enable them to forge ahead to a place of independence and respectability."

What the missionaries could, however, more or less successfully achieve, was to widen the cleavage between the nationalists and this ambitious social group. Political agitations were as much a problem of the missionaries, as it was of the government, for they "widened the gulf between Indians and Europeans, thus setting the missionary in a very difficult position." Mead, therefore, projected himself as the benefactor of the Namasudras, won their gratitude, tried to ensure their loyalty to the government and on a number of occasions, acted as a liaison between the two. Similarly, in other districts as well, the Namasudra leaders sought the counsel

88. Ibid., pp.24,60.
91. Ibid., p.31.
and assistance of the missionaries in establishing schools and hostels and in organising other methods of uplifting their community. That help was readily given by Rev. P. Noble in Dacca, Rev. Sutton at Nymensingh, Mr. Burry at Comilla, Mr. J. Read at Jessore and Mr. W. Carey at Earisal. The missionaries as a result, gained considerable influence among them. When the nationalist movement started and pressures were brought to bear upon the Namasudras to join it, as Rev. P. Noble of Dacca Baptist Mission observed, "the missionaries were able to exercise a steadying influence and helped the masses to maintain their loyalty to Government."

There was of course a tiny group opposed to the Christian missionaries; but the majority were friendly and "thoroughly loyal to Government." Rev. Noble became the Vice President of the Dacca Namasudra Samiti. This organisation, along with its counterpart in Faridpur, which Dr. Mead was associated with, sent deputations to the government expressing the unflinching loyalty of the Namasudra community to the British Raj.

93. Rev. P. Noble, Baptist Mission, to F.C. French, Commissioner of Dacca Division, 15 October 1917, Political (Political), GB, File No.8A-10, 2 November 1917, Prog. No.65.
94. G.E. Lambourn to F.C. French, 9 October 1917, Political (Political), GB, File No.8A-10, 2 November 1917, Prog. No.65.
But such endeavours could actually succeed because institutional incentives were constantly forthcoming from the colonial government. The British, as it seems, were trying through various measures to dilute the mounting intensity of the anti-imperialist agitation during this period, and the best way to do this was to alienate sections of Indian society, as large as possible, from the nationalist movements by encouraging political separatism among the so-called 'depressed classes', simultaneously with the Muslims. The constant tendency of compartmentalising and stereotyping Indian society in terms of primordial categories in the census reports, led to a reinforced caste-consciousness and caste solidarity. This gave rise to a considerable agitation amongst the various lower castes, the Namasudras not excepted. Like many other castes, the Namasudras also sent petitions for the recognition of their new caste-name. During the census operations of 1891, they submitted several petitions, but their prayer was not fully granted. In the caste tables of the census of 1891, the caste was shown as 'Namasudra or Chandal'. Hence in 1901, the Namasudras of the districts of Dacca, Faridpur, Bakarganj, Nymensingh, Jessore and Pabna once again appealed to the government. Bhishmadev Das and several other members of the Namasudra Association of Orakandi, Faridpur, sent a representation,
praying that their caste should be designated as Namqasadra and the old despising name 'Chandal' should be deleted. In support of their claim, they also submitted copies of the vyavasthas or opinions of several pandits of Bengal. But even then, their request was not fully respected. The agitation was, therefore, renewed when the census operations of 1911 were instituted, threatening disturbance of peace at different quarters.

So much consternation was not, perhaps, merely the result of social aspirations. It would not be an absolutely wild conjecture if we suppose that it was generated also by the more material expectations of institutional benefits, such as caste representation in public employment and elected bodies or reservation of seats in educational institutions. Such expectations were fostered in the late nineteenth century by the government policy of 'special protection' for the Muslims. Similar preferential treatment was being meted out to the backward castes as well, in other provinces of India. In Bengal, the very partition of the province in 1905 was designed to elevate the Muslim community from its backwardness and at the same time to strike at the roots of the power of the high caste Bengali bhadraloks, the principal trouble-makers for the colonial government in the

95. General (Miscellaneous), GB, File No.106-4, 3 August 1901, Prog. No.1; also Notes, pp.1-2; two such vyavasthas are quoted in Sitanath Biswas, op.cit., pp.89-93.
province. Such an openly publicised policy of protective discrimination could hardly escape the notice of the ambitious Namasudras, whose hopes and aspirations were now sufficiently inflamed to guide them into the path of political separatism. The nationalist leadership on the other hand, whether moderate or extremist, could not offer any effective alternative social, economic or political programme for integrating the Namasudras or similar other lower castes with the rest of Hindu society and mobilize them into their political movements. The failure was quite apparent during the anti-partition agitation - the first major political movement since the beginning of the Namasudra protest. This gap between the two went on increasing further during the second and the third decades of the twentieth century, as more and more concessions were offered by the colonial government. The Namasudras, in return, did not participate in either the non-co-operation or the civil disobedience movements. Initially, local bodies like the Namasudra Samitis at Orakandi and Dacca organised this movement. But later on, from 1912 onwards, the Bengal Namasudra Association with its 22 district units, tried to provide it with a central organisational framework.

96. Rev. P. Noble, Baptist Mission, to F.C. French, Commissioner of Dacca Division, 15 October 1917, Political (Political), GE, File No.8A-10, 8 November 1917, Prog. No.65; Sitanath Biswas, op.cit. pp.157,160.
The Communal Award and the Poona Pact of 1932 and the Government of India Act of 1935 gave a definite shape to depressed classes' politics in Bengal by reserving seats for the Scheduled Castes in the Bengal Legislative Assembly. The main initiative for organising this third political force in Bengal came from the Namasudras. As we shall see later, a representative of this community participated in the Poona Conference. They took a leading role both in the Bengal Depressed Classes' Association and Federation, founded in 1926 and 1932 respectively, and actively participated in the all-India depressed classes' politics during the critical years of the 1930's. The Namasudra community, in other words, became the mainstay of Scheduled Caste politics in Bengal, providing it with both the leadership and the necessary mass-base.

Simultaneously with this development of social and political aspirations of the Namasudras, there had also been a parallel expression of their articulate caste-consciousness. And that was in the form of communal strife with the Muslims. The first of these riots took place in 1889 in the district of Khulna. There, on a hat (weekly market) day at Gazirhat, a place about 15 or 20 miles north.

of Khulna, a petty quarrel took place among some Namasudras and Muslims on bargaining over the price of some betel-nuts. The Namasudras took the offensive and led by their caste-men of village Jamurshia, they beat the Muslims. Not satisfied with this, particularly as police had arrived and put a stop to fighting on that day, they again assembled next morning in large numbers, armed with spears and shields. But the police once again did not allow any outbreak of violence and dispersed them promptly. In revenge, however, about 5 to 6 thousand Muslims collected on the next day and the Namasudras also prepared to resist. A free fight ensued in which the Muslims got the best of it, as they had the advantage of being armed with guns. The village of Jamurshia, predominantly inhabited by the Namasudras, was freely looted and burnt. Later, about 40 Muslims were convicted for this, while about a dozen Namasudras were also sent up for unlawful assembly and were convicted, although they were acquitted later on appeal. But this was only the beginning of a series of riots that took place over the years at regular interval and were caused by such petty disputes. And this one was in fact of a relatively minor nature, both in terms of number of people mobilized or area affected, as well as of magnitude of violence perpetrated, compared with those that occurred, for example, in 1911 or 1923–25 or 1938.

98. G.S. Dutt, Magistrate of Khulna, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, No.929 J-XIII-14, 5 June 1911, Political (Police), G.E, File No.P5R-1, 5 July 1911, Progs. Nos.326-328.
Indeed such communal tension became a regular feature of the relationship between the two communities, although at an upper level there had been occasional political understanding between the two on the common issue of opposing the nationalist movement. An articulate community-consciousness developing among the members of both the groups perhaps provides the only explanation for this continued tension and frequent outbreak of communal violence. The Muslims had already developed, by early nineteenth century, a solidarity of feeling as a community. They were apt to combine and make common cause against men of other communities where necessary and they were definitely not lacking in martial spirit. For generations, they considered the Namasudras as beneath them and were determined to assert their superiority. The Namasudras, on the other hand, were also a race of hardy people, united by a strong solidarity of feeling and could also fight well when there was a need for it. In the late nineteenth century they had started asserting themselves and claimed to be equals, and sometimes even superiors, to the Muslims. There were thus two large compact bodies, both zealous about their position, living side by side. Each regarded the other as an inferior people and slightest offence to any member was considered to be an affront to the entire community which required immediate redress. The Namasudras gave offence to the Muslims by calling them Nereys, while the latter often despised the former as Charals. And there were constant frictions between
them over lands and hats. The initiative for rioting, however, in almost all the cases, came from the Namasudras. In areas where they did preponderate largely, their haughty attitude led to a breach of the peace. The Muslims only retaliated later and in most cases were successful.

The Namasudra-Muslim relations during the period under study should, however, be described, more accurately, as a love-hate relationship. In usual times, the Namasudras did co-exist peacefully with the Muslims, many of whom were converts from their ranks. On a number of occasions there were also instances of active co-operation between the two communities, when they made common cause against the high caste Hindus on various social issues, as in 1908. There were also occasional political alignments between the two, particularly for opposing nationalist agitations, such as the swadeshi and the civil-disobedience movements. So much so, that by 1930, the colonial government became confident that "the Muhammadans and the Namasudras are solidly anti-Congress." But when the nationalist movement was at a low ebb and there was no immediate need for a political alliance,

99. Ibid; also, J.H. Lindsay, District Magistrate, Jessore, to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, 2 June 1911, Political (Police), GB, File No.P5R-1, B July 1911, Progs. Nos.326-328.

100. Ibid; also, H.A. Collin, Commissioner of the Presidency Division, to the Chief Secretary, Govt. of Bengal, No.220 J.J., 9 June 1911, Political (Police), GB, File No.P5R-1, B July 1911, Progs. Nos.326-328.

101. Extract from Report by the Intelligence Branch, CIJ, Bengal, on the Political Situation and Labour Unrest for the Week ending 9 July 1930, Home (Confidential), GB, File No.597 (1-3) of 1930.
the two communities broke into violent feuds. When they were on the opposite political poles, as during the non-co-operation movement, a series of riots and a pervading sense of insecurity and tension were only the natural corollaries.

V

The Namasudra movement was thus a story of social segregation, protest and political separatism. It weakened the nationalist movement in a way similar to the bid for power by the separatist Muslim politicians. The majority of the Namasudra agriculturists dwelt in the uninhabitable swamps of eastern Bengal. The constant interaction with a hostile nature bred in them a spirit of independence and made them a virile, industrious and martial spirited people. A growing sense of self-respect, arising out of their gradual transformation into a peasant community in course of the nineteenth century, made them conscious of the contempt Hindu society treated them with and the economic exploitation the high caste Hindu gentry subjected them to. This consciousness, first of all, led to an articulate protest against the social and economic injustices perpetrated on them for centuries. Later it took the shape of political separatism, a strategy that appeared, in an age of institutional
politics, to be most appealing and effective to the leaders of a community striving to come out of its backwardness. But while institutional politics remained the focus of attention of its elite leadership, the community-consciousness and protest mentality of the Namasudra masses were articulated through defiance of authority in various forms and also through communal feuds, sometimes against the Muslims and sometimes in conjunction with them, against the high caste Hindus. In this movement, we may, therefore, detect two distinct levels of consciousness and two different levels of movement, but at the same time an effective symbiosis between the two.

The Namasudra movement, it is true, was organised from the top, by a tiny, prosperous and educated section. These people who had moved up in social position in a secular context soon began to feel the gap still existing between their secular status and ritual position. But they were yet to evolve a distinct social identity of their own and had by no means lost their linkages with the less fortunate peasant population belonging to their caste. They were as yet too weak to form a separate political interest group, and because of their extremely low ritual position, too distinct from the high caste Hindu educated community to make a common front with them to press for their political demands. On the contrary, having little
economic surplus in their hands and being ill-equipped
to take advantage of the political concessions in competition
with the high caste educated Hindus, they did not feel any
attraction for the political demands of the nationalists.
They began to think in terms of special privileges from the
government, which they thought would benefit the entire
Namasudra community vis-a-vis the more privileged upper
caste Hindus and thus ensure a corporate social mobility
in the upward direction. Hence they decided to move from
pure social protest of the late nineteenth century to
political separatism in the early twentieth. The promise
of patronage with the prospect of being treated as equals,
created among them a different perception of history and a
different attitude to the colonial government. The present
seemed to be an improvement over the past and indicative
of a better future, when there would be no more discrimination
on the basis of caste and the on-going system of distribution
of wealth and power would be restructured to allow them a
share too. They opted for loyalty to the British government,
for it seemed to be the best way to ensure this desired
readjustment of the social balance.

However, at another level, in the consciousness
of the peasantry at the bottom, much more evident was a
spirit of 'protest'. They seem to have very little idea
about institutional concessions which they could hardly
take advantage of. But what they could immediately feel
and realise, was the fact of social degradation and economic exploitation perpetrated on them by the high caste Hindu gentry. A growing self-awareness of an emerging peasant community led to a spontaneous protest against it. As a mark of defiance of the social authority of the higher castes, they refused to accept degrading menial jobs or to serve as boatmen and palanquin-bearers for them. And where the oppression of the gentry crossed all tolerable limits, they looted bazars or broke into the houses of their landlords. When the government was helpful, they stood by it and took advantage of the situation. But when the state machinery came to the rescue of their harassed landlords, they would not hesitate to take up lathis and daos against the police. The Muslims were their friends, so long as they helped them against the high caste Hindus. But for a community intensely conscious, sometimes even sensitive, about their newly discovered identity, slightest provocation was enough to lead them into widespread violent conflict. This self-awareness of the peasantry was to some extent the result of the efforts of the leadership at the top, which could also effectively channelise the attitude of defiance it
generated into a well-organised movement. Using their caste, religious and kinship ties and by highlighting the plight of the poor Namasudra peasantry, as well as articulating their grievances against the high caste gentry, they successfully mobilized the masses behind their political programme. The organisational network of the Matua sect, though informal at the earlier stage, brought about broader community consciousness and greater social mobilization. It brought about a symbiosis between the two levels of 'protest' mentality, one against low ritual position and continuing exclusion from the sources of wealth and power, and the other against social humiliation and economic exploitation. The common object of their opposition was the high caste Hindu. And the colonial government, the enemy of their enemy, was their natural ally.

The nationalists, both moderates and extremists, failed to evolve an alternative political ideology rooted in mass consciousness. They were not indifferent to the social developments among such lower castes as the Namasudras; nor could they afford to neglect the phenomenon of political separatism growing among them out of a sense of social and economic deprivation. But the prejudices of the society they belonged to and the economic interests of the classes they came from, stood in their way and
prevented them from offering any effective social or economic programme for integrating these aggrieved lower castes with the rest of Hindu society. The promises they put forth soon proved to be empty ones and failed to convince a socially ambitious community such as the Namasudras. They were no longer prepared to wait. As their aspirations could not be accommodated within the process of the freedom struggle, they preferred to stay away from it. They were even prepared to oppose it, if in such a course of action they could see possibilities of fulfilment of their own social ambitions. This loyalty was also systematically encouraged, on the one hand, by the Christian missionaries through their benevolent activities and on the other, by the British government, through its policy of fanning the latent tensions of Hindu society by occasionally giving material concessions to the 'depressed classes' and consistently showing verbal sympathy for their grievances. These tendencies later on led to the development of a separate backward classes' identity with the Namasudras as the main pillar of their movement in Bengal. The first manifestation of such tendencies, however, could be seen during the swadeshi movement.