Social mobility among Dalit in West Bengal: 
A Study of the District in West Bengal

ABSTRACT

In contextualizing caste based mobility study in West Bengal, one encounters two groups of opinion regarding caste system in West Bengal. The traditionalists found the functional importance of caste system and argued it as inalienable part of Hinduism. However, the modernists, which is found to be more popular here, felt evils of caste is a matter of past and it has already been reformed, modernized and displaced by class. But two versions do not contradict but complement each other and dominate public discourses on caste in West Bengal. While class has taken over the political debates in public but the concept of status based on caste and endogamy still pervade the mental world of Bengali Hindus. More overt form of untouchability is atypical in Bengali social scene but economic, social and political power still remains in the hands of upper and middle ranking castes, whose modernity even allegiance to Marxism does not stand in the way of their unshaken faith in ritualistic Hinduism. So absence of caste violence does not justify the absence of caste antagonism as popular perception goes. Caste antagonism occurs only if the hegemonies of Caste Hindus failed to accommodate or absorb Dalit assertion. But Dalit reality in West Bengal revealed despite of having 2nd largest Dalit population, the Dalit assertion found to be conspicuously absent. The ideology of hierarchy and its association with the relations of power constituting the essence of caste system are yet to lose their relevance in a hybrid modern Bengali Hindu culture and society. This study reveals that making some adjustments in form, the caste system in Bengal has managed to sustain its essence and in that sense Bengal is no exception to the general pan-Indian pattern.

A standard argument of the post colonial leftist government in West Bengal since 1977-78 has been that the land reforms and reconstitution of Panchayat provided opportunities for Dalit and backward groups to gain access to power, who were hitherto excluded. Presumably, the development itself could potentially wreck the power structure of Bengali Hindu society and its ethno-ideological world. But at the grassroots level major beneficiaries of this widening of the leftist power base were the middle peasant castes, who remained the most ardent champions of caste privileges of Hindu cultural markers of status (Bhattacharya (2003). Like other parts in India, the politics has been subordinated by caste not just in rural Bengal but highly
educated intelligentsia in the elite neighbourhood of urban south Kolkata (Sen 2001). Despite of radical reformist ideology of Left parties, top leadership of the communist politics remained firmly in the hands of the upper castes (Franda 1971). Even the Communist Parties could not overlook the caste factor while nominating its election candidates. On the other hand, some of the Dalit agricultural labour made their way into Panchayats but they still remained excluded from decision making bodies (Westergaard 1987). Therefore, in present day West Bengal, their limited empowerment has nevertheless resulted in an ideologically driven expulsion of ‘caste’ from the public discourses. Contrary to popular perception, caste question has been far from satisfactorily resolved in post-colonial West Bengal. The social situation in Bengal presents interesting sign of ambivalence that can not always be put into simple cognitive order (Bandyopadhyay 2004).

However, as the traditional barriers to social mobility crumbled down at least officially, there is scope for Dalit in entering all walks of life. Therefore, the present study constituted to assess the social consequences of their mobility, particularly in a State where Left Front is ruling continuously for more than three decades. Since the Dalit were never been homogeneous group, therefore the aspects of social mobility of three lower castes, such as Namasudra, Bagdi and Chamar were studied to explore and analyze the pattern and functional or dysfunctional consequences on economic, political and cultural or social mobility in a moderately developed district such as Nadia. The study identified the mobility enabling factors in comparative framework and studied the complex interaction with the village politics, conflict and negotiation, the cascading effect between upward mobility and availing Constitution enforced facilities leading to formation of new class among the Dalit. It covered how the revival of Hindu religious practices developed into more caste like or tradition bound attitudes among the particular jati counterproductive to these developments among the Dalit. The study also tested three hypotheses, namely, (1) the State intervened economic development inputs caused economic mobility, which manifests in better living condition similar to caste Hindus irrespective of urban proximity and jatis, (2) the higher the political mobility of individual jati, the higher is economic and social mobility of that individual jati, (3) those having achieved a new status from low status tend to identify with higher status and thereby class interest of aspired status and disassociate from interest of class of origin.
This study adopted descriptive research design in studying the economic, social or cultural and political domain of mobility of Dalit in rural West Bengal. While examining economic mobility, variables like occupational base and its inter and intra generational change, income status, wealth status etc. were used. In examining, social or cultural (ritualistic) mobility, variables like educational attainment, social commensality, caste ranking, belief system, status of women etc. were studied. In examining the political mobility, caste movement, political representation and participation in mass organization were studied. In discerning the trajectories of social mobility, interaction pattern including historiography of three castes i.e. Bagdi, Chamar and Namasudra were studied to identify the mobility inducing and inhibiting factors.

In West Bengal, Dalit constituted 23.02 per cent of total population of the State. Based on share of Dalit population to total population, Nadia district was purposively chosen, which shared 7.40 per cent of State’s Dalit population. In Nadia district, Dalit population constituted 29.66 per cent of total population. Comparative approach has always been an important method in sociological studies. Therefore three villages, namely Palashipara, Dutta Phulia and Kaikhali in Nadia district were selected having differential size of Dalit population. Since, family mobility was the primary concern of this present empirical research therefore the data for this study was collected through the interviews from representative sample of 150 heads of households, which were selected purposively with equal representation from selected villages. Since, the study primarily focused on three individual jatis i.e. Namasudra, Bagdi and Chamar, therefore the households in each village were selected from each of the aforesaid individual ‘jati’ in proportion to the caste’s representation in entire village population. Estimation of such households has been made from electoral rolls. The primary data was collected from the head of households through interview schedule consisting of structured as well as open-ended questions on various aspects of the problem. Upon collection of data, a code book was prepared and entered into SPSS spread sheet for analysis. Cross-tabulation, Chi Square test and correlation tests were done to understand the relations of various variables.

The analysis of empirical data so collected revealed that the Dalit were improving their socio-economic status along the dimensions of education, occupation and income. The co-efficient of correlation between education and income and caste and education were found to be statistically significant and education and occupation
was positive though not statistically significant. To indicate the separate effect of each of these variables on the remaining variables, partial correlations were worked out and found that caste status was able to predict itself the education, which in turn was able to predict by itself the family income, occupational aspiration of children, occupational change and satisfaction level of present occupational grade. Thus, caste status and education appeared to be efficient index of socio-economic status. Therefore, in dealing with the consequences of social mobility, all other factors were correlated with the educational background of the respondents and caste status in order to assess the differential effects of social mobility on them.

Inter-generational social mobility was measured by comparing two generations in the educational and occupational backgrounds of the respondents with those of their fathers. The kind of association found to exist between the father's and son's occupational status showed that the higher the status of the father, the smaller the proportion of sons in the lower occupational grades and the lower the status of the father, the smaller the proportion of sons in the higher occupational grades. Similarly, in measuring educational mobility, it was found that the higher the education of the father, the higher was the education of the son. Hence, it may be argued that even if theoretically it is possible for all the members of the Dalit to receive any level of education and achieve mobility, in practice, advancement in this field is gradual. In fact, the socio-economic status of the parents affected the socio-economic status of the sons. Thus, there is every reason to believe that while the expansion of facilities had opened the door to social mobility for the Dalit, a large majority of them were still not able to avail themselves of such facilities unless their family background supported them.

In raising their status in the caste hierarchy, the Dalit were found making various efforts. Caste status, though ascribed was found important in differentiating efforts made for caste climb. Despite of being dissatisfied with their present occupational grade, Bagdi respondents were found to be more immobile in occupational change and their educational attainment, monthly income, awareness and obtaining benefits under reservation were lower than the Chamar and Namasudra respondents. However, they abandoning for their tamasik guns such as heavy consumption of liquors, quarrelsome behaviour, lax sexual moor, committing small theft or badmashi etc., started adopting elements of bhadralok lifestyle. But, despite of the active political interest and the advantages of political mobilization, their caste
claim of Kshatryahood or ‘barga-khatriyas largely remained inconclusive due to their poor income mobility. Chamar respondents were found to be more mobile in occupational change than the Bagdi and Namasudra respondents. Chamars, who originally migrated from Bangladesh around 1971, had undergone the process of Gandhian social reforms. They Sanskritised themselves by abjuring beefs, forbidden meat, stopping eating carrions, curbing their drinking habit, abandoning widow remarriage, divorce, replacing bride price by dowry and even adopting new title i.e. Ruidas or Das. They were doing their utmost to give their children education to raise their social status. Chamars were also endeavouring to forsake all those occupations, which were considered degrading. Their association with Sreema Mohila Samiti helped them in reinforcing the anticipatory socialization. Now, Chamars of Dutta Phulia emulating the cultural elements of bhadralok, called themselves as ‘Das’ as their caste name and Das-para as the name of their hamlet in lieu of Chamar-para, which was derogatory to them. The monthly income and educational attainment of Namasudra respondents were found to be more than that of Chamar and Bagdi respondents. Their perception in removing untouchability through occupational change was found to be stronger than Chamar and Bagdi respondents. Educational attainment, occupational change, income mobility, perception in removing untouchability though their own effort, awareness to reservation policy and also getting benefits out of it helped them in improving a lot. The opening of new occupational avenues, such as migration to Gulf countries for employment helped them in income mobility. However, the less-educated respondents were found acquiring the traditional symbols of high status, such as, the customs, rituals, ideas, beliefs and way of living of the higher castes in raising their social status. In the words of Srinivas, it may be argued that they are becoming Sanskritized but Modernization is more operative among the educated and upwardly mobile.

A majority of the respondents improved their status in a multiple status hierarchy but most of them did not bother about their ‘corporate’ group (caste) status in caste hierarchy. Instead, they were satisfied with their social status acquired through their material achievements and their better interaction with others. However, the cross tabulation between educational attainment and caste status identification revealed that educational attainment gave rise to contra caste identity or Harijans elite among them. A little over one-third (i.e. 33.67 per cent) of the respondents perceived that they have been unable to earn a social status in commensurate with
their improved occupational status. A linear trend found existing between identification and disclosure of caste identity. Disclosure of caste identity diminished with educational attainment. About 18.00 per cent respondents having considerable educational attainment placed themselves in the middle and working social classes, whereas the less educated placed themselves in the working and lower social classes. This showed that their class-consciousness directly influenced by changes in their socio-economic status. Thus, while, on the one hand, social mobility determines an individual's evaluation of his social status, on the other, it resulted in some status discrepancies among the different positions that a person held. Even if the Dalit improved their educational and occupational status, they felt that they did not get the same social status in society as given to members of the higher castes. They were aware that their improved educational and occupational statuses did not receive adequate social recognition because of their lowly social origins, which corroborated the findings of Bailey (1958) and Lipset and Zetterberg (1970). However, when the aspect of contra-identity was segregated caste wise, Namasudra respondents were found expressing more contra-caste identity than respondents of other castes. Since, Namasudra and Chamar are found to be more mobile; therefore, they experienced caste as barrier more frequently than other did as the educated and socially conscious Dalit found their caste background mainly responsible for their low status in society. Psychologically, they wish to escape from their stigmatized caste (ethnic) identity so, contra-identification generates among them significantly. It is found that 41.67 per cent of sample Chamar respondents and 21.33 per cent of sample Namasudra respondents never disclosed their caste identity in public. On the other hand, Chamar constituted 55.56 per cent of total contra-identity respondents and rest by the Namasudras.

The probability of the extent of correlation between caste status and use of various surnames was found significant. Interestingly, none of the Bagdi respondents used Caste neutral and Contra-Caste or disguised surnames. Similarly, none of the Chamar respondents used Contra-Caste or disguised surnames and none of the Namasudra respondents used caste indicative surnames. In various social mobility indices mentioned earlier testifies that the relative social mobility of Namasudra caste than other castes of Dalit community. Since, social status of an individual was influenced not merely by him as individual but also by the social status of the group to which he belonged thus mobile Dalit or the socio-economically advanced sections
of the Dalit tried to dissociate from their own caste groups as their rejected past hold them back for formation of new identities for themselves that would be accepted in society. Consequent of social mobility, the residential pattern of the Namasudra underwent a change. The educated and upwardly mobile members of these caste left their secluded colonies and found residence in Dakshin Ranaghat, where various castes living side by side and simultaneously undergoing in a state identity crisis, what Isaacs (1965) stated as ‘semi-limbo’. The uneducated and less educated among the Namasudras in Nadia were still clustered in some of their own caste-based colonies separated from the localities of the higher castes. But, due to their very low stigmatistic social status, migration to other place did not help the Chamar respondents in getting social recognition.

Majority of respondents perceived that fear of pollution, poor economic condition and unclean occupations were main causes of restricted social commensality. Chamar and Bagdi respondents experienced discrimination more pronouncedly than the Namasudra respondents. Namasudra respondents felt restriction in inter-dining more frequently than the Chamar and Bagdi respondents. Since, the economic condition of Bagdi and Chamar respondents did not reach up to the level for getting opportunity of inter dining, they perceived less restriction in inter dining. The income grade of respondents was found to be significantly related with community feast and entry into caste Hindu temple. Again, caste status was found to be significantly related with community feast and entry into caste Hindu temple.

Social mobility has repercussions on the family and marriage patterns of the Dalit. The data corroborates that an extended family was negatively related to social mobility. A larger number of members of the family live away, having decreasing functional or effective ties with the other members of the family and there was a tendency towards the establishment of nuclear households. Social mobility encouraged family dissociation in the sense that as soon as the Dalit acquired education, they separated themselves from the uneducated members of the family, who were still engaged in their lowly traditional occupations, because they wanted to be different from them. The institution of marriage also witnessed a change as a result of social mobility. It revealed that caste status and education attainment were influential factor in determining the differential marriage age, attitude towards inter-caste marriages, widow remarriage and divorce, dowry etc. Education tended to exercise pressures for a higher age at marriage for men and consequently for women too.
Furthermore, the educated respondents preferred a higher age at marriage for sons and daughters, as compared to the illiterates and less-educated respondents. The higher the social mobility, the lower was the proportion of respondents opposed to inter-caste marriages. Further, it was observed that the traditional authority of parents in respect of the marriage of their children was passing gradually into the hands of the children themselves as a consequence of social mobility. The differential effect of social mobility had been found to be true in respect of widow remarriage and divorce. The higher-educated were found to be more in favour of divorce and widow remarriage than the less-educated individuals. Social mobility replaced bride price by dowry.

The changes that were taking place in the institution of family of the Namasudra respondents might give the impression that they were moving towards the value of grate tradition of Sanskritization due their greater conformity to adherence to the traditional values of caste Hindus. Namasudra adopted the local landholding castes such as Mahisyas and Kayasthas as their normative reference group. The effect of having higher castes as the reference group was revealed through the pattern of anticipatory socialization in which they were engaged for status achievement. Paradoxically, Bagdi and Chamar households might give the impression that they were moving away from the value of grate tradition of Sanskritization as result of the opposite kind of behaviour. Bagdi and Chamar did not find Namasudra, a similarly placed group, as normative group. Hence, Merton’s hypothesis that persons belonging to a lower stratum in rigid social system may adopt only similarly placed people from neighbouring strata, as reference group needs modifications.

Social mobility affected the respondents’ awareness of the various governmental policies pertaining to development of Dalit. It was found that the educated respondents had a greater knowledge of the facilities and availed themselves of the same to a larger extent than the illiterates and the less-educated persons. Similarly, among the three castes, Namasudra respondents were found to be more aware of the various provisions of reservation policy and they availed most of the facilities of reservation policy. Similarly, Chamar and Bagdi respondents lagged far behind in level of awareness and availing facilities of reservation policy. Regarding the respondents’ satisfaction with the Government's policy vis-à-vis the uplift of the Dalit, educated respondents were found to be more satisfied. Thus on the whole social mobility influenced the awareness of the Dalit in the matter of the various policies of
the Government. The overall picture that emerged on the implementation of the reservation policy that the palliative of reservation rather facilitated only the improvement of stray individuals within families than helping entire families to come up in life. This had definitely affected the economic mobility of many a mobile individuals, as they had to carry the burden of their entire families on their shoulders.

The post independent Dalit movement in West Bengal appeared to be very weak excepting the occasional articulation of their protest through Dalit literature. Partition of Bengal in 1947 was disastrous to Namasudra caste. Despite of their willingness to submit to the dominant representation of power, Namasuradas lost their political edge with partition. After partition, they were the support base of *Hindu Mahasabha* and subsequently to Left parties and were organized under the banner of United Central Refugee Council. A large number of Namasudra migrants settled in Nadia and were solid base of Left parties. Their numerical superiority helped them in bargaining for political privileges from various political parties. In Namasudra dominated areas of Nadia district, both the Left and anti-Left parties offered them nomination for assembly seats. Their numerical dominance also forced the local dominant caste Mahisya to form coalition for dominating local Panchayat. The 73rd Panchayat Amendment Act, 1992 further streamlined it. The emergence of AITMC opened a new opportunity for the aggrieved Namasudras to find out alternative centre of political power, which testified in Panchayat General Election, 2008, when in Namasudra dominated areas CPI(M) led Left Front was defeated in Gram Panchayats and Panchayat Samitis. Further, the inclination of *Matua Mahasangha* of Namasudra to AITMC added a religious axis to their newly found political coalition. Bagdi, who were native of the study area were found to be more ethnocentric. Despite of their effort for caste climb to Kshatryahood did not evoke wide reorganization as found in central Bengal. They filled the roles of the fighters and recalcitrant subordinates to one or the other village leaders. They were known for their active interest in village politics, which helped them in enrolling themselves as local vigilantes of CPI(M), subsequently they were also enrolled themselves in contending political parties such as INTUC, INC, AITMC etc. However, unlike in central Bengal districts, such political mobilization of Bagdi did not helped them for their income mobility. Like Namasudra, Chamar of this district are Bangladeshi migrants though most of them migrated after 1971. Chamar, having very low ritualistic rank, were never considered as standard Hindu. In pre-partitioned Bengal, they were internally segmented into
Barabhagiya and Chotobhagia. The former tried to Sanskritise themselves by inculcating bhadrolok cultural elements but later were found to be less developed. In post-partitioned Nadia district, Chamar had undergone Gandhian social reforms in Dutta Phulia. But, the Gandhian social reforms restricted themselves to evolve as successful entrepreneur in leather industry similar to the Chamars of Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh. Chamars’ efforts in emulating bhadralok lifestyle were slowly being recognized by caste Hindus. No longer, Chamars of Dutta Phulia liked to recognize by their caste name but want to recognize themselves as Das or Rui Das. Even they want to recognize their caste as ‘Charmakar’ not more derogatory term as Chamar. However, education led emulation of bhadralok life style did not help them in ossifying caste identity at corporate level. Hence, the Gandhian social reforms led Sanskritization was limitarian in itself. However, the contribution of exogenous agencies such as Sreema Mohila Samiti was worth mentioning in breaking ‘barrier of pollution’ for anticipatory socialization. However, their association with Sreema Mohila Samiti and their association with Gandhian social reforms were interpreted them as the supporters of Indian National Congress, subsequently with AITMC. The local Gram Panchayat, which was earlier dominated by CPI (M), avoided their village for undertaking major developmental intervention. In Panchayat General Election 2008, such Gram Panchayat was occupied by AITMC, but still the time when the fieldwork was undertaken, the Gram Panchayat did not undertake any major development intervention in their hamlet. Chamar ideal lies with submissiveness and self-exclusion due their stigmatized occupation did not evoke much political interest for them.

In pre-partitioned Bengal, under the influence of certain liberal religious sects self-respect movement developed among the Namasudras. In nineteenth century with establishment of the Matua sect, Namasudras organized themselves a religious sect under the influence of Sri Guru Chand Thakur (1847-1937), who preached the elimination of caste inequality, gender inequality and the possibility for spiritual relief through performance of secular duties. At about the same time, several other lower caste spiritualists like Prabhu Jagatbandhu (1871-1921) spread their teachings among the Namasudras of Faridpur and Jessore. However, Namasudra reorganized into Mahua Mahasansha at Thakurnagar, North 24-Pargana. It may be mentioned that the Baruni Fair was initiated at birthplace of Harichand and Guru Chand Thakur in Orakandi village of Gopalpur in Bangladesh and later shifted to Thakurnagar a year
after Independence (i.e. 1948). Every year lakhs of disciples visited for a holy dip into
the water of ‘Kamana Sagar’, a large tank beside the new temple of Thakur Bari in
North 24-Parganas district. A fortnight-long fair is being organised on Baruni festival
every year. Rather propagating the progressive ideology of Harichand and Guru
Chand Thakur, Matua Mahasangh now found started deifying them. The holy dip
into the water of ‘Kamana Sagar’ is tantamount to religious Brahmanic parochialism
than having any of progressive reforms into it. The teleological construction of
pativrata nari was not just hallmark of Chashi model in constructing the culture but
Matua Mahasangh soon started subscribing in Matua sangeet (Bandyopadhyay
2004). Hence, Matua-Mahasangh, jeopardising the progressive ideology what the
Dalit craved for seemed to be constraint in transcending teleological boundaries of
Hindu discourse. The Brahmanisation and recent politicalization of Matua-
Mahasangh has reduced it into a religious organization with clear political leniency.
In Nadia, the activities of Matua-Mahasangh revolved around the ‘Hariseva’. Their
politicalization also has created a cleavage among the Namasudra mass threatening
the already fragile Dalit solidarity. Therefore, whatever scope the Namasudra had in
ossifying caste movement in post independent Bengal died prematurely. In pre-
partitioned Bengal Chamar undertook social reforms by Sanskritizing themselves. In
post-partitioned Bengal, they came into association with Gandhian social reforms.
Their association with Sreema Mohila Samiti further reinforced their anticipatory
socialization in this direction. However, their Kalipuja in Dutta Phulia, in which
people from all the community participated, helped them for developing better
interaction pattern with caste Hindus. They feel pride that the Goddess Kali, which
they established are revered by all. Their Sanaskritization helped them altering their
belief system towards such as caste bound Hindu system. Similarly, Bagdi who
mainly tried to Sanskritize themselves through political mobilization but did not
bother to have religious axis in their socialization process. Conversion to Christianity
was yet another phenomenon worth mentioning. Since colonial period, the Christian
missionary started working among the masses of Nadia district. A large number of
low caste persons belonging to Namasudra and Chamar embraced Christianity for
their status improvement. Ordinarily, the Christian converts claimed themselves as
‘Khristan jati’. However, such conversion did not help them in caste climb. They still
were considered as low caste Hindu converts and had to claim their low caste status
in getting facilities under reservation policy.