CASTE DYNAMICS IN BENGAL POLITICS: THE NAMASUDRAS, 1937-1967

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RANJANA DAS

Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi- 110067
2019

Centre For Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067, India

Date: 5/7/19

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis entitled, 'Caste Dynamics in Bengal Politics: The Namasudras, 1937-1967' submitted by me for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is my original work and has not been previously submitted to this or any other University.

Ranjana Das.

Ranjana Das

CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this thesis may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Smahajan

Prof. Sucheta Mahajan

Supervisor

Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110067

Smahajan

Prof. Sucheta Mahajan

Chairperson

CHAIRPERSON
Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110067, INDIA

CHS Office Phone : (011) 26704456, 26704457
E-mail : chsjnu@yahoo.com, centreforhistoricalstudies@gmail.com

For my mother

Preface and Acknowledgement

This thesis is a long overdue project that has breached several deadlines and hence, largely owes its submission to all those who have finally made it possible. The central idea was conceived some time in 2008, after the submission of my MPhil thesis when I decided to work on a topic that was deeply related to my social identity and could humbly contribute to an epistemological understanding of 'caste' in Bengal/West Bengal. In any case, this domain of interest has been fairly, a belated one, in so far as West Bengal is concerned where caste as a public discourse was unacknowledged for a long time under the Left rule. In the last few years this has changed with political decline of the CPI (M) and rise of the Trinamool Congress in the state, which has also stimulated a growing interest in unravelling the complex underpinnings of caste in *Bengali* society/politics. As a Namasudra myself, I also wished to unearth some of the myriad 'stories from below', from within the community, largely unknown and often untold. In this, I was primarily driven by a historian's desire to document the 'self-narratives' of familiar co-caste members of my native village, the first-generation settlers of the *Sakdaha* refugee colony, located in the district of Nadia in West Bengal. Hence, in many ways this has been a quintessential journey of self-realization.

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I take this opportunity to thank all the library staffs of the National Library, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta Police Museum in West Bengal; Nehru Memorial Museum and Library and the National Archives of India in New Delhi and; the British Library and the Library at SOAS and of course JNU library for their kind cooperation and help.

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Finally, I wish to thank my entire family for helping me sustain and finally sail through this. My parents have been a consistent anchorage. My father has been a source of inspiration while my mother has nurtured my being in every way. I, especially, cannot thank her enough for her sleepless nights, helping me deal with the initial hiccups of motherhood and rearing a small child while writing my thesis. My sister, Ruchira and brother-in-law, Vikas have encouraged me through their emotional support as well as their critical engagements with my research work. Adi, my nephew has been a source of joy. My husband, Krishanu, is a soul friend who has always cared and supported me in innumerable ways, whether it meant being patient with an extremely jittery wife or helping me organise my research work in its final stages. Both my father-in-law and my mother-in-law have been extremely encouraging and supportive. And finally Mili, my two-year old daughter, has been such a delightful distraction.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Politics of self-representation based on caste has meant emancipation for large sections of lower caste Hindus suffering from social discrimination, who were officially labelled as Scheduled Castes from the mid twentieth century colonial period.[1] While discussing the impact of successful lower caste assertions in the post-independence period, Sudha Pai, an eminent political scientist, says that these movements have 'increased political consciousness, enabled greater political participation of this disadvantaged section, and helped shape the nature and direction of democracy in the country.' Although, much of the initial processes of awakening and political consciousness, she emphasises, had begun in the colonial period itself.[2] Since the Scheduled Castes are not a homogenous group, their movements of assertion have also been significantly diverse. They emerged at various times in the colonial and post-colonial periods and were more area-specific (often intra-regional and not just inter-regional) rather than exhibiting any singular narrative of dissent. Such movements which were otherwise triggered by similar histories of oppression with the intention to overhaul similar kinds of societal deprivations nevertheless represented varied hermeneutics of cultural dissent and political activism.

Scheduled Caste politics acquired a more consolidated, 'national' character, enunciating strategic integration from within, especially after the promulgation of the Government of India Act of 1935 which made it mandatory to reserve legislative seats for the SCs. It led to the development of two, dichotomous discourses of integrating the Scheduled Castes across

[1] The low and untouchable castes of Hindus, officially known as the 'Depressed Classes' were designated as the 'Scheduled Castes' in the Government of India Act of 1935. In this thesis, the terms, low caste, backward caste, untouchables, Depressed Class and Scheduled Caste will be used interchangeably. The term, Scheduled Caste will be used to refer to the low castes in the post-1935 period. After independence, the term, 'Dalit' meaning 'oppressed' was largely used by low caste activists to refer to themselves and this designation has also consequently gained much currency in the academic writings. However, I have avoided using this term in the thesis since it was not in currency during the temporal period with which I am dealing.

[2] Sudha Pai, *Dalit Assertion* (Oxford India Short Introductions), OUP: New Delhi, 2013, pp. xii- xv

the country, one being *assimilative*, which tried to mobilise the SCs for the national movement led by the Indian National Congress, and the other being an *autonomous* one, which sought an alternative way of establishing an exclusive platform for the SCs. While Babu Jagjiwan Ram, a veteran Congress leader, represented the former, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar had crafted the latter. The later day Scheduled Caste politics largely belonged to either of the binary trends, although diversity of each movement had been intrinsic to its own circumstances.

Much of the academic interest on the relevance of caste has flourished largely after the rise of the Dalit Panthers movement in Maharashtra in the 1970s and proliferated more with the growing assertion by lower castes in politics from the 1990s after the Mandal agitation. Satish Deshpande, reviewing six decades of writings on caste in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1958 to 2013, appraises that the contemporary response to caste has been largely shaped by the Mandal phenomenon. And although caste was hardly an unknown issue before 1990 but the agitation that had been triggered by the union government's implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations was a 'decisive turning point'.[3] In West Bengal however, run by a Left Front government at that time, the Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, refuted the legitimacy of caste saying that 'caste was a legacy of the feudal system and viewing the social scene from the casteist angle was no longer relevant for West Bengal.'[4]

Political dominance of the Left in West Bengal for a prolonged period has undermined the importance of caste as a public discourse. This, of course, was interlinked with the experience of Partition after the country was divided in August 1947 and since then caste based politics has been quite ambiguous in the state, particularly in so far as the Scheduled Castes are concerned, despite their constituting a substantial part of the demography. A metamorphosis occurred when the Trinamool Congress came to power in 2011 after defeating the CPI (M) led Left Front government of thirty four years through fundamentally mobilising caste identity and garnering Scheduled Caste votes, thereby presupposing the advent of a new genre of identitarian politics of community.[5] Not only Trinamool Congress, but the recently

[3] Satish Deshpande, *The Problem of Caste: Essays from the Economic and Political Weekly*, Orient Blackswan: New Delhi, 2014, p.4

[4] Jyoti Basu's statement in Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics*, Permanent Black: Delhi, 2003, p.255

[5] Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, 'Party Society, its Consolidation and Crisis: Understanding Political Change in Rural West Bengal' in Anjan Ghosh et al. (eds.), *Theorizing the Present: Essays for Partha Chatterjee*, OUP: New Delhi, 2011, pp. 233-237

held Lok Sabha elections in 2019 also saw a surge of support for the BJP from the Scheduled Castes of the state. A recent study claims that since 2014, the RSS and the BJP have explicitly targeted the lower caste communities and expanded their base largely in the southern parts of West Bengal.[6] As a matter of fact, while Mamata Banerjee's use of identity idioms, from caste to religion, has marked 'a sharp shift from the bhadralok to the chhotolok', the BJP also does not seem to challenge the emergence of the '*chhotolok'* in grassroots politics.[7] In any case, political salience of caste, through mobilisation and assertions of lower caste communities, has come to acquire a definite place in 'post-communist' West Bengal. The developments over the last decade have certainly set in pace speculations of trying to make sense of the new shifts in the state's politics.

The recent emergence of the caste factor in West Bengal's politics is not as unprecedented as it might seem. Undivided Bengal during the colonial period had seen considerable assertion by Namasudras, a low and untouchable caste of the Hindu community, who even partook in provincial governance as a result of forming 'class' alliance with the Muslims. Partition of India in 1947 which simultaneously divided Bengal and Punjab into two randomly cut halves meant abrupt consequences for the two provinces unlike the other provinces which saw a more gradual transition. Communal frenzy of the last decade leading up to the Partition and its seismic aftershocks certainly impacted on other forms of identity politics such as caste. Lower caste movements focussed on demanding social honour and political representation such as that of the Namasudras became overshadowed and overpowered by the oppositional discourse of Hindus versus Muslims and later, by the more existential crises of displacement and rehabilitation post- independence. Having said that, it is also important to point out that the meta-narrative of the time, of 'communalism-partition-displacement', often tends to prevail upon the subtle, every-day realities of that time thereby obscuring many alternate narratives of representation, resistance and survival. With this in view, this thesis attempts to explore and analyse the nuanced dynamics of Namasudra caste politics and social existence during the transition period, from 1937 to 1967, which were also years of historic elections that had been politically transforming.

[6] Uday Chandra et al (eds.), *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, Routledge: Oxon and New York, 2016, Introduction, p.8

[7] https://scroll.in/article/923875/between-mamatas-and-modis-populism-the-bhadralok-is-now-a-marginal-player-in-bengals-politics. '*Bhadralok'* is a commonly used Bengali term to refer to the educated, middle class population of Bengal/ West Bengal. '*Chhotolok'* is exactly its opposite class, often used in a derogatory way, to refer to the ordinary and often downtrodden masses.

Dissenting Caste and the genre of 'Low' Caste Politics

Distinctive caste consciousness centred on an ideology of dissent emerged during the colonial period, stimulating a genre of reformist movements among the lower caste communities demanding social emancipation and political representation. A considerable corpus of significant academic work has helped enunciate the historical trends of such movements which had occurred in various parts of the country during the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The works of Gail Omvedt, Rosalind O'Hanlon and Eleanor Zelliot focus on the emergence of low caste movements in Western India[8]; Mark Juergensmeyer's monograph reflects on the growth of Ad-Dharm movement in Punjab[9]; Nicholas Dirks's work on Tamil Nadu[10]; Sekhar Bandopadhyay's work on the Namasudra movement and Swaraj Basu on the Rajbanshis, in eastern India[11] and; more recently Ramnarayan S. Rawat's work on the Chamars of Uttar Pradesh.[12] From being stigmatised subjects of a caste-ridden society to becoming equal citizens with exceptional rights protected by a democratic state, people of the lower caste community have come a long away. This complex history of their political identity formation involved a daunting struggle for rights and recognition through critiquing of the caste Hindu society and creation of a distinctive political counterculture.[13]

The beginnings may be traced to a unique relationship with colonial modernity. Swaraj Basu has recently argued that anti-caste ideology should not be seen only as a product of the conditions created by British rule and was very much rooted in Indian historical tradition.

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[8] Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India, 1873-1930*, Scientific Socialist Education Trust: Bombay, 1976; Rosalind O' Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1985; Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*, Manohar Publishers and Distributors: New Delhi, 1992

[9] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20th Century Punjab*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 1982

[10] Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethno-History of an Indian Kingdom*, University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1993. Later he also published *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton University Press: New Jersey and Oxfordshire, 2001.

[11] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, second edition, OUP: New Delhi, 2011; Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbanshis of North Bengal*, Manohar: New Delhi 2003

[12] Ramnarayan S. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2011

[13] Anupama Rao says that these elements of radicalism eventually made the Scheduled Castes whom she prefers to call Dalits visible to the Indian political-legal order as exceptional subjects. They served to alter the shape of Indian democracy through creatively redeploying the founding assumptions regarding the subject of rights and the terrain of politics. See Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, Permanent Black: Ranikhet, 2010

Here Basu refers to the Protestant traditions of Bhakti and other heterodox sects which had emerged from within Hinduism and challenged the hegemonic Brahmanical order. [14] While it is an invaluable argument, it is also true that the mantle of caste had become far more pervasive and totalising during the colonial period than it had been before. This has been rightly emphasised by Nicholas Dirks: 'What we take now as caste, is, in fact, a precipitate of a history that selected caste as the single and systematic category to name, and thereby contain, the Indian social order. In pre-colonial India, the units of social identity had been multiple, and their respective relations and trajectories were part of a complex, conjunctural, constantly changing political world.'[15]

British rule in India derived from three parallel, yet overlapping discourses aimed at the normative knowledge-production for colonial purposes and consolidation of imperialist hegemony – these were the 'Orientalist', the 'missionary' and the 'administrative'.[16] The eighteenth century Orientalists intent on reviving the ancient civilization of India through a search for and study of the Sanskrit textual tradition with the help and collaboration of native Brahmin pundits (since they had exclusive access and knowledge of them) strengthened the idea of India being quintessentially spiritual, where social life was determined by religious norms. And since caste had a presumed religio-scriptural basis and signified a system of Hindu social organisation, it soon acquired a centrality and fed into the British assumption of Indian society being traditional. The missionaries on the other hand, propelled by their proselytising imperatives embarked upon ethnological researches. Their discourse was to attribute the cause of India's backwardness to the despicable hold of Hinduism and its core institution of caste system. These two discourses formed the basis of official stereotypes that were simultaneously used for administrative purposes. Consolidation of colonial rule, especially in the post-1857 period, presupposed developing an administrative system capable of exerting greater control, effective only through a comprehensive understanding of the social underpinnings of a subject society. Caste and religion therefore served as ready sociological tools for official ethnographic surveys meant to understand Indian society.

[14] Swaraj Basu (ed.), *Readings on Dalit Identity: History, Literature and Religion* (Critical Thinking in South Asian History series), Orient Blackswan: New Delhi, 2016, p. 13
[15] Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, p. 13
[16] Bernard Cohn, 'Notes on the History of the Study of Indian Society and Culture', in Milton Singer and Bernard Cohn (eds.) *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, Aldine: Chicago, 1968

However, such epistemological investment in understanding primordial identities of the natives for colonial administrative purposes often resulted in conferring standardised meanings to essentially complex and fluid aspects that were purposed to serve official attempts to rationalise, simplify and derive broader generalisations, which were easier to handle. These produced ethnological coherences perceived on the basis of caste clusters or broad groups of castes of similar occupational status caused a reaction which Lucy Carroll calls the 'caste cluster consciousness'. [17] It explains formation of caste associations, particularly among the lower caste groups which eventually developed as collective, representative bodies to negotiate and bargain for opportunities from the colonial state on the basis of their state of prolonged backwardness. Carroll traces emergence of caste cluster consciousness largely through the colonial administration of Hindu law and workings of the colonial court and; the decennial census operation.

Judicial administration of the colonial state not only standardised traditional law through according legal notions to local customary law but also applied them to large collectives (caste clusters) assuming them to be corporate units in a way that they had never been in the past, both socially and legally. Before the advent of the British, questions of family and personal law were meted out locally through informal methods of hearings before the village elders from the local *biradari* (exogamous kin group) or the local *jati panchayat* and; the legal system consisted of not only the tenets from the sacred texts but also from the inventory of popular customs dealing with the fine separations of regions, castes and often even as small a unit as family. Under the British system, these local usages were made subject to the hegemony of textual law where the colonial courts would often fail to take into account the local dimensions such as status of individual family, clan or local castes. Instead the court would pronounce its verdict based on the knowledge of collective caste category thereby investing such units with a legal identity that it had not possessed before. By doing so, Lucy Carroll argues, the judicial administration significantly contributed to the emergence of caste cluster consciousness. The court having given a legal validity to the collective caste category then expected a degree of cultural uniformity that simply did not exist. The Indian response to this and to other administrative practises that recognised caste cluster as the unit of patronage

[17] The term, 'caste cluster' has been used by the Indian sociologist, Irawati Karve in 1958 to refer to collections of endogamous units that frequently follow the same or similar occupation. As a result of this clustering, it led to consolidation of castes of similar social ranking in turn acting as stimulants for growth of political consciousness. See Lucy Carroll, 'Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (Feb, 1978), pp. 233-250

or proscription was to attempt to organize around it in an endeavour to create the judicially desired uniformity and the politically required pressure group.

Census conducted by the colonial state also played a critical role in according salience to caste identity, a fact that has been widely acknowledged in numerous studies.[18] A recent study by Padmanabh Samarendra shows how the official ethnographic surveys such as the census (started from mid nineteenth century) began as a fundamental change from the text-based explanations offered by the Sanskritists (colonial Orientalists such as William Jones and Henry Colebrook) in the early decades of the nineteenth century about caste.[19] The empirical surveys shifted the focus from the theoretical *varna* order to the more practised *jati* formations. But it became almost impossible to classify the numerous jatis on an all-India basis owing to their discrete and divergent characteristics. Hence, for statistical requirements these surveys 'produced' uniformities and hierarchies by selectively deriving upon the textual order of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, which Samarendra calls 'a process of *empiricalisation* of textual traditions'. Such processes of ordering of and tabulation of data informed the subsequent census operations by the 'administrator ethnographers'. While Denzil Ibbetson and John Nesfield offered a functional/occupational explanation of caste, Herbert Risley focussed on the anthropometric aspects, which provided the cognitive thrust to the censuses of 1881, 1891 and 1901.[20]

The census classification of 1901 was a significant one which sought to rank castes in the census records as per their order of social precedence in Hindu hierarchy. Herbert H. Risley, the Census Commissioner and Director of Ethnography for India, provided a scientific basis to caste by relating it to race. He made use of anthropometry to establish racial difference between high and low castes, thereby reinforcing the Brahmanical *varna* model of caste. Hence, in the census recording of 1901 he decided to determine the specific social position of

[18] Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure, and Objectification in South Asia' in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other* Essays, OUP: New Delhi, 1987; Arjun Appadurai, 'Number in the Colonial Imagination' in Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds.) *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1993; Rashmi Pant, 'The Cognitive Status of Caste in Colonial Ethnography: A Review of Some Literature on the N.W. Province and Oudh', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 24(2), 1987; Frank Conlon, 'The Census of India as a Source for the Historical Study of Religion and Caste' in Gerald Barrier (ed.) *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, Manohar: New Delhi, 1981

[19] Padmanabh Samarendra, 'Census in Colonial India and the Birth of Caste' in Satish Deshpande (ed.) *The Problem of Caste*

[20] Rashmi Pant, 'The Cognitive Status of Caste'

castes alongside their enumeration. For the colonized however, this seemed to be an endeavour to freeze an otherwise constantly changing hierarchy.

A large number of voluntary caste associations emerged in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, either demanding social mobility in the colonial scheme of classification or focussed on developing internal unity in order to act as fundamental pressure groups vis-à-vis the state. Ishita Banerjee-Dube in fact points out that there was a direct co-relation between enumeration of castes in the census and growth of caste based associations in the late nineteenth century. Apart from the fact that several caste groups felt it necessary to come together and negotiate a higher ranking to avoid being discriminated against, the caste-wise inventory also underlined the huge discrepancy between numbers and privilege as it made different sections of the Indian population aware of their numerical strength in the population.[21] Thus, western and southern parts of India where predominance of the Brahman caste far exceeded its numerical proportion were early to witness growth of the non-Brahman movements.

Jyotirao Phule from Maharashtra was probably the first of the low caste ideologues in the late nineteenth century. He belonged to the Mali (gardener) caste. In 1873 he formed the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truthseekers Society). Phule blamed Brahmanical monopoly of power and opportunities for the predicament of Sudra and Ati-Sudra castes and attempted to bring together non-Brahman peasant castes (Kunbis) and the untouchables through an ingenious inversion of the Orientalist theory of Aryanization[22]. Phule used the Aryan theory to his own advantage: the fact that the upper caste leaders traced their origin from Aryan conquerors could be used to argue that they descended from foreigners and that their culture including the caste system was alien to India's original people. Phule therefore portrayed the Aryans as invaders who settled in India at a later period to subjugate the original inhabitants of the land and destroy their civilization. In this re-interpretation of the past, the invaders were identified as Brahmans whereas the indigenous groups were described as descending from the original ruling class, the Kshatriyas. In 1875 he was attracted to the Arya Samaj but kept his distance from the movement because he did not trust the upper caste reformers. He also remained aloof from the Congress for similar reasons.

[21] Introduction: Questions of Caste in Ishita Banerjee-Dube (ed.), *Caste in History*, OUP: New Delhi, 2008
[22] Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*

The southern part of India saw a movement centred upon and upholding Dravidian identity, which had emanated from a sense of cultural distinctiveness from the Aryan culture, believed to have been brought from outside by the Brahmans who had subjugated the original Dravidian inhabitants. This discourse gained currency in the late nineteenth century as a result of the emphasis made by the British Orientalists. However, it acquired more character in the subsequent period with representative low caste politics against domination of the Brahmans. The Dravidian movement eventually took two different paths, one, a more moderate, Justice Party bargaining for political advantages with the Government in the form of substantive reforms and the other, a more militant trend of 'Self Respect' in Dravidian identity under E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker. These non-Brahman and backward caste movements by mobilizing people around the amorphous category of their jati ended up concretizing, at conceptual and practical levels, notions of caste or caste-clusters that were neither ethnically nor culturally homogenous, nor had the structural reality in terms of the corporate activity or direct influence on the behaviour of those classified in the category.[23]

Around the 1920s, the low castes in various parts of the country rose to significant political consciousness, to organise more cohesively and often independently. Some of these movements were the Ad-Dharm movement in Punjab, the Mahar movement in Maharashtra with B.R. Ambedkar at its vanguard, the Namasudra movement in Bengal, the Adi Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu, the Adi Andhra movement in Andhra and the Adi Hindu movement in U.P. Although the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms provided the spark but the crucial background had been of the massive economic and political upheavals of the post-war period. These movements which were profoundly regional, determined by their specific circumstances, appeared to acquire some national platform by the 1930s largely due to the efforts made by Ambedkar. Despite the diversity of the low caste movements, scholars have time and again invested in understanding their basic trends. Thus Christophe Jaffrelot makes an interesting analogy of a 'north/ south-west contrast' where he says that while there had been substantial 'ethnicization' of low castes in west and south India, which endowed them with a caste unity and hence an egalitarian alternative identity, such transformation did not occur to the same extent in the north largely due to the ethos of 'sanskritization' in the Hindi belt.[24] The Adi-Hindu movement of north India, far from establishing a separate identity that would situate the untouchables out of the caste system, instead used their so-called original

[23] Ishita Banerjee-Dube, *Caste in History*, p. xlii
[24] Christophe Jaffrelot, Religion Caste and Politics in India, Primus Books: Delhi, 2010, p. 451

identity as a means for promoting their status within the system.[25] Speaking of such practices in Bengal where the lower castes took to wearing *poite* or the sacred thread, Sekhar Bandopadhyay says that 'sanskritisation' not only implied emulation of the upper castes but, also meant appropriation of certain exclusive symbols of power and divesting them of their symbolic significance, thereby emphasising on the subversive nature of such acts.[26] D.R. Nagaraj seeks to understand the low caste movements of the colonial period as attempts of building a new structure of memory like the others engaging in the project of modernization launched by the colonials. He identifies three different 'modes' of tackling the problem. The first, he says is the 'pragmatist mode' represented by M.C. Rajah and other constitutionalists who were more concerned with the practical questions of seeking upward mobility of the lower castes in terms of economic, social and political power than being concerned about cultural symbolism. The second, he describes as the 'mode of radical revival' which seeks to bring marginal structures to the centre in a way that could be appealing to the conservatives too. The Ad-Dharm movement of Punjab was an example. But it turned out to be more assimilationist than being actually radical. The third approach was the 'mode of alternative memory' represented by Ambedkar. It meant a complete denial of the existing tradition which he believed was imbued with a caste system that determined all aspects of life in Indian society and was oppressive for the low castes. Hence, there was a fascination for modern development which was upheld to be the harbinger of 'a new society *sans* untouchability'. [27]

These lower caste movements were however, not without ambivalence. As pointed out by Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt, the movement in Maharashtra was influenced by the non-Brahman movements of the region such as the Satyashodhak Samaj; the Ad-Dharm movement in Punjab had also been part of the Arya Samaj and; the Brahmo Samaj upper caste reformers had helped the Namasudras and the Adi-Andhras. But most of the caste Hindu based social reform movements had failed to create a really radical anti-caste unity among the lower castes. The Arya Samaj and non-Brahman movements in particular aspired to create such a unity and did succeed to an extent in influencing and mobilising sections of middle caste peasants. But this proved insufficient. According to Patankar and Omvedt the

[25] Ibid, p.456
[26] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, Sage Publications: New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London, 2004, p.27
[27] D.R. Nagaraj, 'The Problem of Cultural Memory' in *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays: The Dalit Movement in India*, Permanent Black: Ranikhet, 2010

northern based Arya Samaj never really challenged the 'Aryan' notion or 'chaturvarnya' as such. Rather, it sought to 'purify' the lower castes. And whereas the non-Brahman movements ideologically challenged the whole notion of caste hierarchy and sought to unite the original inhabitants of the land, in practice the middle caste non-Brahmans, often potentially privileged, were criticised for emulating Brahmanic culture and falling prey to self-interests.[28] Such ambivalences in existing reform movements necessitated 'departures' for more effective mobilisation of low castes' concerns.

In any case, as Anupama Rao points out that by the late 1920s conditions enabling activism of low caste communities were well in place such that disparate and localised challenges to caste system were 'coalescing' into explicit demand for civic rights. Thus she refers to the phenomenal Mahad satyagraha of 1927 led by the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha in Maharashtra which marked a departure in the tradition of social dissent as it embodied the question of untouchables' accessing of secular rights. The satyagraha was meant to enforce an old resolution by the Mahad municipality which had granted access to water of the Chavdar tank to members of the untouchable community, the due implementation of which was opposed on grounds of religious orthodoxy by the local temple authority. The movement which acquired magnanimous proportions also saw a public burning of the Manusmriti, the sacred Hindu text of law, to mark a symbolic rejection of the Hindu caste hierarchy. [29] There were also the temple entry movements of the Parvati temple satyagraha of 1928 in Maharashtra and the Vaikom temple road satyagraha of 1924-25 in Kerala, organised as mass campaigns to oppose ritualistic proscriptions for low caste, untouchable Hindus. The differences were also crucial – while the Kerala satyagrahas were initiated by radical Congressmen of varying castes that met some success with the Travancore temple entry declaration of 1936, the Maharashtra satyagrahas were primarily organised by the low caste communities with some support from the upper castes but met with no success and were finally halted by Ambedkar on grounds that he had no wish to integrate with Hinduism anyway.[30]

[28] Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt, 'The Dalit Liberation Movement in Colonial Period' in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Yagati Chinna Rao (eds.) *The Past of the Outcaste : Readings in Dalit History*, Orient Blackswan: Hyderabad, 2017. The article was originally published in *EPW*, vol. 14, no. 7/8, Annual Number: Class and Caste in India, February 1979, pp. 409-424

[29] Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question*

[30] Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt, 'The Dalit Liberation Movement in Colonial Period'

The 1930s were decisive in 'nationalising' the caste question and in seeking political retribution for the historical injustices suffered by the low caste communities. Gail Omvedt considers the years between 1930 and 1936 as a 'turning point', as these years marked the All India Depressed Classes Conference at Nagpur in 1930; Ambedkar's participation at the First Round Table Conference and; his clash with Gandhi before and at the Second Round Table Conference finally culminating in the Poona Pact of 1932.[31] Ambedkar had organised an All India Depressed Classes Conference in Nagpur on August 8, 1930 before attending the First Round Table Conference in London as one of the two members representing the 'Depressed Classes', where he argued in favour of national independence and adult suffrage with reservation of seats and definite safeguards for the untouchable communities. He upheld this view in the RTC where he stated in his opening speech, "We feel that nobody can remove our grievances as well as we can, and we cannot remove them unless we get political power in our own hands… It is only in a Swaraj constitution that we stand any chance of getting the political power in our own hands, without which we cannot bring salvation to our people…"[32] Thus, originally, Ambedkar had not been supportive of separate electorates for the untouchables provided adult suffrage was granted. But his turned out to be a 'minority position' as with the Congress being absent, other minority interest groups were persistent on pressing for separate electorates for themselves.[33] As adult suffrage was rejected by the British, it left Ambedkar with no other option but to support separate electorates, which of course led to his confrontation with Gandhi at the Second Round Table Conference in 1931. The subsequent announcement of the Communal Award in 1932 that granted separate electorates to the 'Depressed Classes' led to Gandhi's fast unto death at Poona. The phenomenon had been quite spectacular that saw a historic clash of ideas between Gandhi and Ambedkar, both claiming to represent the interest of the downtrodden Hindus.

The most nuanced analysis of the Gandhi-Ambedkar encounter of 1930s is perhaps the one made by D.R. Nagaraj who describes the divergence in ideologies as 'self-purification versus self-respect' – for Gandhi, it was a religious question that had to be solved or reformed from within Hinduism whereas Ambedkar defined the problem in terms of building an independent political identity for the untouchables within the structures of social, economic and political

[31] Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, Sage Publications: New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London, 1994
[32] Ibid. Ambedkar's speech made on November 20, pp. 168
[33] Ibid. p.169

power.[34] Though Ambedkar had to ultimately step down in view of Gandhi's deteriorating health conditions but the encounter had been quite transforming for both. Says Nagaraj, 'Because of the confrontation, both of them had changed their emphasis: to put it crudely, Gandhiji had taken over economics from Babasaheb and Ambedkar had internalized the importance of religion.'[35] The Gandhi-Ambedkar debate was also symptomatic of emerging binary tendencies within caste politics which had acquired some pan-Indian forms by then through 'linkages' with political parties – while one was 'integrative', represented by the Depressed Classes League connected with the Congress and the Depressed Classes Association linked with the Hindu Mahasabha; the other was an 'autonomous' anti-caste tradition, represented by the Depressed Classes Federation connected with Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party.[36] This ideological divergence only grew with time.

The political compromise of the Poona Pact between Gandhi and Ambedkar agreed upon joint electorate with 'increased' reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes.[37] Since increase in the number of reserved seats affected the distribution of legislative seats for Hindus in Bengal which had a large Muslim population, it invited reactionary criticism from the upper caste Hindus of the state, a discussion of which will be undertaken subsequently. With the Government of India Act of 1935, the elections of 1937 were unprecedented in bringing forth fundamental lower caste politcs to the national centre-stage and making them substantial claimants to political power sharing.

Namasudras and Emergence of the Caste Question in Bengal

The genealogy of low caste movements for 'self-respect' in India which saw active representation of the Namasudra caste in Bengal during the colonial period however, met with an abrupt erosion of their political visibility with the province's partition in 1947. Of course the temporal cusp between the closing days of the British Raj and onset of a newly independent nation-state becomes critical in understanding this fundamental change in the transforming political equations of the state. That being the focus of this thesis, it may be

[34] D. R. Nagaraj, 'Self-Purification vs Self-Respect: On the Roots of the Dalit Movement' in *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays*
[35] Ibid. p. 56
[36] Eva-Maria Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections*, OUP: New Delhi, 2009
[37] Ibid. p. 65. The numbers of reserved seats were increased from 78 to 148 out of a total of 780 seats.

relevant first to gauge the initial trajectory towards the development of a discourse of self-respect and self-representation.

The history of Scheduled Caste politics in Bengal has been largely associated with fundamental political assertion by Namasudras of eastern Bengal and to some extent, Rajbanshis of northern Bengal. The rise and growth of Namasudra consciousness in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries was much comparable to similar movements of the Ad-Dharmis in Punjab, Ravidasis in UP and Mahars in Maharashtra. The fringe benefits of modernization having trickled down to those living on the margins had gradually led them to become self-conscious and motivated them to seek ways of social emancipation.[38] The Namasudras, by and large an agricultural community, at least by the end of the nineteenth century, had acquired some economic stability through cultivating reclaimed lands from the swampy and jungle terrains of the districts of Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna. They were predominantly based in these areas although a comparatively lesser number of them also resided in Mymensingh and Dacca. [39] In the agricultural constellation of eastern Bengal, the landlords were mostly high caste Hindus while the rent paying peasants were low caste Namasudras and lower class Muslims. Broadly, the social spectrum of a caste-cum-communal divide had corresponded to the economic class dichotomy in the countryside. Despite this, as a result of the trickle down benefit of land reclamation and commercialised jute agriculture, a minority of Namasudra peasants were able to rise to some economic prosperity, which stimulated their desires for social mobility.

The beginnings of their caste consciousness or 'caste cluster consciousness' may be traced to both spiritual as well as secular factors. Sekhar Bandopadhyay has traced the beginnings to the development of a *Matua* sect, which had emanated from within the community itself, as a heretical-spiritual sect during the nineteenth century and soon became an important rallying point. The sect was formed by Harichand Thakur in Orakandi village of Faridpur in eastern Bengal, which was expanded further and formalised by his son and successor, Guruchand

[38]Modernization in this context would mean the developments brought about by the colonial state which even if not directly meant to benefit the lower castes, eventually proved advantageous for them as either they trickled down to them as in case of the Namasudra peasants who benefitted from the reclamation of cultivable lands and commercialised jute cultivation or like the Ad-Dharmis of Punjab or Ravidasis of UP who exclusively benefitted from the leather industry as the higher castes were ritually prohibited to undertake leather trade.

[39] As per the 1901 census, 75.14 % of a total caste population of 1,860,914 lived in these areas, while according to the 1911 census statistics, 77.94 % of the Namasudras were engaged in agricultural occupations. See Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste Protest and Identity*.

Thakur. Although the sect largely derived from Chaitanya Vaishnavism and Bhakti traditions, already influential in the countryside, what made it essentially popular among the low castes was its spirit of subverting and challenging the predominant caste relations and hegemonic social order. Another aspect of the religious discourse that aimed to address the existential problems of the low castes was its justification of materialistic desires which ran in contravention to the dominant Vedantic doctrine of renunciation popularised at that time by Ramakrishna Paramahamsa among the upper caste, educated gentry in Bengal. As Guruchand had said, '*Arthe jano mahasakti Lakshmir bahan/ Jatha Lakshmi tar kachhe ache Narayan*' (meaning, wealth is the source of all power and those having wealth are also blessed by the lord, Narayana).[40] Essentially meant to motivate the daily toil of these hard working people in the hope of a better livelihood, the discourse emphasised on a work ethic that makes it reminiscent of the Weberian theory of Protestant Christianity stimulating a spirit of capitalism in early modern Europe. Thus, the *Matua*, as a regenerative spiritual movement was profoundly responsive to the specific needs of the Namasudras as a socially aspiring low caste community.[41]

Census enumeration for secular-administrative purposes by the colonial state posited an occasion for coalescence of community consciousness among the Namasudras when the taxonomical practice that involved registering of respective caste identities had them registered as 'Chandals' in 1872.[42] The Namasudras as *Chandals* were declared as the 'autochthones of Eastern Bengal' who took refuge in the marshes in order to escape persecution of the upper castes.[43] But the upwardly mobile Namasudras by virtue of their acquired agrarian status claimed to have come a long way from the traditionally ascribed peripheral status of the Chandals and found it quite derogatory to be likened to them. Instead, they demanded to be known as 'Namasudras', a more respectable appellation. F.B. Peacock, Commissioner of the Presidency Division, for example noted in 1881 that the Chandals in the Narail Subdivision by virtue of an improvement in their economic conditions were aspiring for a higher status in the Hindu caste hierarchy and had taken to call themselves as

[40] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, 'Popular Religion and Social Mobility in Colonial Bengal : The Matua Sect and the Namasudras' in Swaraj Basu (ed.) *Readings on Dalit Identity*, p. 324.
[41] For original preachings of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur and their Matua movement see, Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, Matua Mahasangha: Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas, 2012
[42] See the anthology in Utpal Biswas (ed.), *Ganamukti: Namasudra der Utsho Sandhan Sankhya* (Freedom for the Masses: Origin of the Namasudras), Dhaka, April - September, 2006 for discussions by various Namasudra scholars interrogating social origin(s) of the community.
[43] Report of L.S.S. O'Malley, I.C.S., District Gazetteer of Faridpur, 1925 in Upendranath Biswas, 'Banga ekti Janagoshthi' ('Origins of the Bengali or Banga population'), ibid, p. 39

Namasudras.[44] Through repeated petitioning and sending of representations to the government from Dacca, Faridpur, Bakarganj, Pabna, Jessore and Khula, the Namasudras also submitted *vyavastha patras* or opinions of as many as forty erudite Brahman pundits in order to substantiate their demand and establish their social divergences from Chandals.[45] Not only that, it also occasioned *Sanskritization* attempts made by a section of Namasudra elites to claim their brahman origin and made a further demand to be called 'Namasudra Brahman', claiming descent from the Vedic Rishi, Kasyapa.[46] Guruchand Thakur led Matua movement had become hugely involved in these processes of seeking social elevation. As a result, the final change in designation, from Chandal to Namasudra, happened in 1911 census (the official change was not immediate and despite inclusion of 'Namasudra' in 1891 census, the nomenclature, Chandal was also maintained alongside, until it was completely removed in 1911 census). The working of the census, as pointed out already, for various parts of the country, consolidated an intrinsic consciousness towards putative caste identities and the lower castes often sought it as an opportunity to improve their social position.

Lastly, literary publications, written and edited by Namasudras, focussing on themes predominantly about themselves, was another modern-secular medium of enabling 'print interaction' for a wider scope of discussing specific caste problems and interests as well as developing community solidarity. Manohar Mouli Biswas, one of founding members of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha which was formed in 1992, in fact claims that 'dalit' literature is a consolidated movement within Bangla literature whose genesis may be traced from the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1909, 'Namasudra Darpan' was started by Rashbehari Ray, a modest school teacher from Khulna, who edited and published the journal himself from Calcutta. In April, 1911 Shashi Kumar Baroibiswas, a practitioner of traditional medicine or 'Kabiraj' by occupation, started publication of 'Namasudra Dwijatattwa' from the Swarupkathi district of Barisal, which was also contemporaneous with formation of the Uttar Banga Sahitya Parishad under Panchanan Thakur who had a Master's degree in Sanskrit at that time and made efforts to spread literary and cultural education among the low caste communities through his organisation. In May 1911, 'Namashudra Jnanabhandar', edited by Balaram Sarkar was published from Boltoli, Faridpur and in June 1913,

[44] Annual Administration Report, Presidency Division, for 1880-1881, in Kartik Thakur, 'Namasudrer Utsho Sandhane : Ekti Porjalochna' ('Tracing the origins of the Namasudras: A Review'), ibid, p. 182
[45] Ibid, p. 183
[46] Census of India, 1911, Vol. 1, Part 1, in S. Sarkar, 'Namasuda der Utsho Sandhan', ibid, p. 93

'Namashudra Chandrika' edited by Jadunath Majumdar was started from Jessore.[47] Of course, the more conspicuous 'Namasudra Suhrid' from Orakandi, Faridpur, edited by Surendranath Thakur, son of Guruchand Thakur, was started at this time largely with the intention to pursue his father's mission to promote literacy and social awareness among Namasudras. The 'Namasudra Hitaishi' was also published around the same time from Dacca, edited by Bharat Chandra Sarkar. Another journal published from Dacca was 'Namasudra Patrika' which started publication in 1920. There were also 'Namasudra Shakha' and Mukunda Behari Mullick's 'Pataka' which he co-edited with Raicharan Ray and, which had played a pivotal role in spreading social awareness among Namasudras. Rasik Lal Biswas' 'Adhikar' was published from Jessore and Mohini Mohan Das' 'Sadhak' from Dacca and during the 1940s, 'Jagaran' and 'Peoples' Herald' were started by Jogendranath Mandal.[48] Indeed, a fairly long lineage of literary publication for a predominantly illiterate and subjugated low caste community. Publication and circulation of these journals were meant to increase social awareness and also to promote secular education, incidentally also a dictum of their cult leader, Guruchand Thakur. However, this was not peculiar to the Namasudras alone as similar literary movements also occurred simultaneously in other socially aspiring low caste communities of Bengal such as Rajbanshis, Poundra Kshatriyas, etc.

The growth in caste consciousness did not lead the Namasudra community towards nationalist activities, even though Bengal was at its helm at that time. They had consciously refrained from supporting the Swadeshi movement which happened in the wake of an announcement of Bengal's partition in 1905. Bidyut Chakrabarty in fact notes that by 1905 the Namasudras had 'emerged as a well-knit community in East Bengal, opposing almost in a body, the Swadeshi movement, which was considered to be an exclusive concern of the high caste Hindu gentry who denied them social rights'.[49] On one hand, there was alienation from Congress led nationalist movement and on the other, affinity towards the colonial state for practical advantages. The Namasudra leaders realised the importance of education and employment as avenues to secure higher social status. But these were also spaces where they

[47] Manohar Mouli Biswas, *An Interpretation of Dalit Literature, Aesthetic, Theory and Movements : Through The Lens of Ambedkarism*, Chathurtha Duniya: Kolkata, 2017

[48] Naresh Chandra Das, 'Namasudra Sampradayer Patra-Patrika O Samajik Granther Prakash' in *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh* ('Newspapers and journals published by the Namasudra community' in *Namasudra community and Bangladesh*), U.M. Printers: Kolkata, 1997, pp. 154-155

[49] Bidyut Chakrabarty (ed), *Communal Identity in India: Its Construction and Articulation in the Twentieth Century*, OUP: Delhi, 2013, p.216

faced uneven competition and discrimination from the privileged upper caste Hindus. Hence, when the Muslims secured protective discrimination from the colonial state in 1906, it also inspired the Namasudras to ask for the same.[50] Subsequently they urged for political representation like the Muslims when the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 conceded to the Muslim demand for separate representation.[51]

The antipathy towards nationalist politics was maintained even during the era of mass agitation of the Non-Cooperation and the Civil Disobedience movements led by Mahatma Gandhi, which had struck a discernible national chord and involved participation of various social classes. But in Bengal, the fervour did not seem to have touched the Namasudra peasants who remained much aloof, despite Chittaranjan Das having personally approached Guruchand Thakur. Sekhar Bandopadhay says that this particular disdain of Namasudras towards the national movement may not be interpreted as merely a manifestation of loyalty towards the British but more of an 'an expression of protest against social and economic injustices perpetrated on them by the high-caste gentry and professional classes, who had for long constituted the leadership of the struggle against the Raj. This mentality, in other words, reflected a social perception in which nationalism, for obvious reasons, appeared as elitist, leading to a consequent inclination to defy its ideological hegemony.'[52] Guruchand Thakur considered nationalism as a fundamentally *bhadralok* affair which failed to comprehend the daily struggles of the peasants who would famish to death should they 'non-cooperate' with the state through abandoning cultivation and that too under the vanguard of the high caste Hindus who had always despised and oppressed them. The Namasudra peasants had not only remained distant from the movement but in many parts of eastern Bengal, particularly in Bakarganj, had even actively opposed it.[53]

Conversely, the self-conscious Namasudras seemed more intent on seeking separate political identity on the basis of their backwardness through building community strength on one hand and on the other, bargaining for 'protected' rights and concessions from the colonial state. Even the Rajbanshis of northern Bengal had followed an almost similar trajectory although

[50] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, 'Protest and Accommodation: Two Caste Movements in Eastern and Northern Bengal, c. 1872-1937' in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Yagati Chinna Rao (eds.), *The Past of the Outcaste*, p.301. The article was originally published in *The Indian Historical Review*, vol. 14, nos. 1-2 (June 1987- January 1988).
[51] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p. 84
[52] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, 'Social Mobility in Colonial Bengal' in Ishita Banerjee-Dube (ed.) *Caste in History*, pp. 189-190
[53] Ibid., p.190

they had reservations about being classified as 'Depressed Class' because of the stigma attached to the category but nevertheless aspired for special favours from the government on the basis of their depressed socio-economic conditions.[54] Anyhow, in the years to come, the Namasudras emerged as a significant voice that took to represent not only their own particularistic caste interests but also those of the disadvantaged sections in general. The Government of India Act of 1919 which recognised the 'special needs' of the backward castes and reserved one of the nominated seats for the latter in the provincial councils, had Bhismadeb Das nominated in the first Legislative Council in 1921. In the subsequent legislatures that were formed in 1923, 1926 and 1929, the 'Depressed Classes' in Bengal were represented by Nerod Behari Mullick, Mukunda Behari Mullick, Rebati Mohan Sarkar, Rasik Lal Biswas, all of them being Namasudras. These representatives repeatedly placed demands for increased opportunities in education and employment in government services for the backward castes as well as registered their distrust in the higher caste nationalist leadership. Even when the Indian Statutory Commission visited India in 1928 the backward castes of Bengal were primarily represented by the Namasudras. [55] As the situations unfolded, they were seen at the vanguard of the lower castes' assertion in Bengal and represented provincial interests at the national platforms. In their memorandum sent to the Simon Commission (1928) they urged for reservation of seats for the 'Depressed Classes' in proportion to their population and creation of separate electorate. Mukunda Behari Mullick's Bengal Depressed Classes Association unequivocally supported B.R. Ambedkar's representation of the 'Depressed Classes' cause at the Round Table Conference of 1930, where the latter insisted upon a separate entity for the depressed sections for political and constitutional purposes.[56]

Subsequent declaration of the Communal Award in August 1932 granting separate electorate to the 'Depressed Classes' apart from the Muslims was a high point in autonomous caste politics that had managed to extract far-reaching gains based on an official recognition of their socio-political distinctiveness. It obviously created a furore in nationalist circles in

[54] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, 'Protest and Accommodation'
[55] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*
[56] Ibid. p.154. However, it would be erroneous to assume that the Namasudras had a consensus on the issue of separate electorate. At the time of Second Round Table Conference, several Namasudra groups passed resolutions in support of joint electorate and also expressed their confidence in Gandhi's leadership. Organisations such as Bengal Namasudra Franchise Board, Jessore District Namasudra Association and Gopalganj Namasudra Unnati Bidhayani Samiti had supported joint electorate with reservation of seats in 1932 after the M.C. Rajah - B.S. Moonje Pact.

general, and in Bengal particularly, where the veteran practitioners of nationalist politics, the Hindu *bhadralok*, were appalled at the sudden consequences of facing an inversion of power vis-à-vis the Muslims of the state, who were a demographic majority. Further subtraction of the 'Depressed Classes' seats only reduced them to an 'impotent minority' in a Legislative Assembly which they had hoped to dominate in the new era of provincial autonomy.[57]
Apparently, the proposed distribution of legislative seats fell short of the expectations of major indigenous communities – where the Hindus comprising 44% of the total demography got only 32% share or 80 seats including reserved seats for the backward castes; Muslims comprising 54% got 119 seats or 47.8% of the total seats[58] and; even the 'Depressed Classes' or the backward caste groups also seemed disgruntled at their allocation of 10 seats. Pramatha Ranjan Thakur at a public meeting of the Depressed Classes of Bengal in fact laid a demand of at least 37 seats (proportionate to their population strength) out of the 80 seats in the 'General' Hindu constituency to be elected on the basis of separate electorate, which significantly alarmed the nationalists at such an open acceptance of the separatist principle.[59] The nationalists in general were perturbed by the divisive implications of the Communal Award, intended to segregate the lower castes from their putative Hindu identity. Upon this and in order to thwart it, Gandhi had declared his fast unto death. Polemics of caste placed into perspective by the Communal Award in the form of a binary choice between 'emancipation' and 'disunity' had significantly churned the different sections of the Hindu community. However, as Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt argue that the backward castes' demand for separate electorate was not akin to the principle of separatism of the Muslims based on a separate homeland. Rather, it signified 'functional' representation of specific social groups outside the domination and control of their social superiors, 'as an aspect of proletarian democracy'.[60]

Gandhi's historic fast finally ended with the signing of a compromise, Poona Pact, with Ambedkar in which the principle of separate electorate was dropped in favour of reservation of seats for the 'Depressed Classes' out of the general seats in provincial legislatures. In

[57] See Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1994, p. 21. Chatterji argues that the Communal Award of 1932 had been a strategic safeguard devised by the colonial state to limit the scope of the recently granted autonomy to the provinces. It was based on a decision to divide power in the provinces among rival communities and social groups which, in its view, constituted the Indian society.
[58] Ibid. p.20
[59] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp.155-156
[60] Patankar and Omvedt, 'The Dalit Liberation Movement'

Bengal the numbers of such reserved seats were raised to 30 seats from the 10 seats that the Communal Award had initially granted and election to these seats was to be held through joint electorate subject to a special two-tier procedure. Despite Rasik Lal Biswas' presence from Bengal during the signing of the Poona Pact, the representative backward caste groups of Bengal largely condemned the Pact alleging that they had not been consulted and that joint electorate would not do justice to their proper representation. Many of the Namasudra associations and Namasudra led groups criticised Ambedkar for committing such a 'political blunder'. In fact, district organisations such as the Faridpur District Depressed Classes Association, founded by P.R. Thakur who later went on to support the Congress, upheld the Communal Award, implicitly even at the cost of threatening Gandhi's life who had been fasting in protest.[61]

For the Hindu bhadralok in Bengal, already smarting under their dwindling political prospects due to the Communal Award, the subsequent Poona agreement that aimed to rectify the colonial policy only meant an additional deduction of their legislative seats, thereby instigating them further towards reactionary criticism. Their reactions reeked of their perceived insecurities at an anticipated threat of subordination in the hands of the traditionally depressed sections whom they had forever dominated. To quote one such memorandum:

> The depressed classes in Bengal have got reserved for them 30 seats, but they are allowed to try for other seats as well. In some parts of North Bengal and of East Bengal the depressed classes form the bulk of the population. At present they have secured 7 seats. With enlarged franchise and in larger house they can count upon it to 14 seats. Consequently, from general constituencies the Hindus (other than depressed classes) cannot expect more than about 35 seats as against about 45 seats or more of the depressed classes. Hindus already badly hit by the very unfair division of seats as between themselves and Mohammedans, have been almost finished by the Pact.[62]

[61] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 154-157

[62] Memorandum prepared by A.K. Ghose, Barrister-at-law at Calcutta in April 1933, circulated at the instance of Hindu Sabha, British Indian Association and Indian Association of Calcutta, in Zetland Papers, MSS EUR D-604, vol. 21- 22, NAI

Not only that, the bhadralok also tried to contest the validity of the depressed section's demands on the basis of denying an oppressive practice of social untouchability in Bengal as compared to other provinces.

> The Lothian Committee which held a penetrating investigation into the whole question at first hand came rightly to the conclusion that the problem of depressed class representation does not exist in Bengal, as it does in other provinces. All Bengalee Hindus – irrespective of questions of caste or sub-caste – draw water from or bathe in the same well or tank without let or hindrance… From the potential standpoint, one would be justified in saying that there is no such body as the depressed class in Bengal at all…[63]

Having said that they targeted the socially mobile low caste communities of Namasudras and Rajbanshis in particular, alleging that the two dominant castes by virtue of the nature of their geographical distribution over the several districts of Bengal would ultimately capture the majority of the seats apportioned by the Poona Pact.[64]

Thus, if the Communal Award posed a political threat, the Poona Pact was interpreted as far worse by the *bhadralok* of Bengal. Ambedkar in fact, suggested a way out to relieve the Caste Hindus of Bengal through redistribution of seats given to the Depressed Classes without reducing their total allotment. In other words, if a certain number of seats were to be taken away from the Depressed Classes of Bengal to give relief to Caste Hindus there, then to retain parity of position, an equivalent compensation of seats had to be given to the Depressed Classes in one or more of the other provinces of India, where the Caste Hindus were not in a minority such as Bombay, U.P., and Orissa (*refer Table No 1.1*).[65] This 'Plan' was submitted should the Joint Parliamentary Committee decide upon a modification of the Poona Pact. However, Ambedkar's 'suggested modification' could not make much headway as the Congress itself split over the issue of Communal Award, with Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya registering his dissent with Gandhi and forming the Congress Nationalist Party along with M.S. Aney in 1934 in protest against the Award. Malviya in fact stated in a letter written

[63] Memorandum entitled 'The Betrayal of Britain and Bengal', ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ambedkar proposed that the Caste 'Majority' provinces of Bombay, U.P. and Orissa were best suited for re-distribution of seats where, as per their current state of representation, the Caste Hindus in Bombay could forego 29, in U.P., 20 and in Orissa, 15, without causing any detriment to their interests. See 'A Suggested Plan for the Modification of the Poona Pact to relieve the Caste Hindus of Bengal' by B.R. Ambedkar to Samuel Hoare, IOR/L/PO/6/89A

to the Party on June 20, 1935 that Ambedkar must be persuaded to agree to a fairly reasonable reduction in the number of seats allotted to them in Bengal 'without asking for further seats in other provinces which are not likely to agree to allot further seats to the depressed classes'[66] Ironically, even the bhadralok Congressmen in Bengal did not seem to pay much heed to Ambedkar's proposition for modification in the distribution of seats for the Depressed Classes, which could have otherwise mitigated their political problems. In the period that followed, Bengal saw protests by the Hindu middle classes demanding repudiation of the Communal Award, with renowned litterateur, Rabindranath Tagore heading the Anti-Communal Award Committee that was formed in Calcutta in 1936.[67]

Table No 1.1

Position of Caste Hindus in Hindu Majority Provinces

		Madras	Bombay	C.P.	U.P.	Bihar	Orissa
I.	Total of Caste Hindu seats…	137	117	72	135	84	46
II.	Minimum seats necessary to constitute a majority …….	108	88	57	115	77	31
III.	Excess of total caste Hindu seats over the minimum seats necessary to maintain a caste Hindu majority and which the Caste Hindus can afford to forego without being reduced to equality or minority ……	29	29	15	20	7	15
IV.	Excess of Caste Hindu seats over their minimum majority seats after allowing for deductions according to the terms of the proposal put forth in this memorandum……..	29	24	15	17	7	13

[66] Congress Policy on Communal Award: Bengal Forces a Change by Congress Nationalist Party, Bengal, dated August, 1939 in *Shyama Prasad Mooerjee Papers*, Instalments II- IV, Subject File no. 160, NMML, p. 5
[67] *Bengal Anti-Communal Award Movement: A Report,* Calcutta, 1939, NMML

Note: (i) In this table the expression "Caste Hindus" is used to denote Hindus other than the Depressed Classes.

(ii) In constructing this table the seats allotted to special interests have been resolved into communal quotas.

Source: *'A Suggested Plan for the Modification of the Poona Pact to relieve the Caste Hindus of Bengal' by B.R. Ambedkar to Samuel Hoare, IOR/L/PO/6/89A*

For the Scheduled Castes (official designation after 1935) of Bengal who had been quite amorphous otherwise, notwithstanding their ultimate acceptance of the Poona Pact despite having reservations, the whole episode of an orthodox Hindu reaction only contributed to their increased cohesion. With the Pact being irrevocable, it made way for unprecedented developments in Bengal where the existing power equilibrium was considerably shattered in favour of newer dynamics to emerge. From the subsequent promulgation of the Government of India Act of 1935, the Muslims had particularly benefitted from the grant of separate electorate while low caste Hindus also achieved political distinction through reservation of 12% of the legislative seats. A strategic union of the two political underclasses could prove politically transforming, an opportunity that was soon provided with the growth of a quintessential peasant movement since both these sections had largely belonged to the particular economic class. The movement became popular among the Muslims and Namasudras of eastern Bengal and acquired a significant 'class' character especially when the peasantry in general, was badly hit by the post-war slump of the 1930s and consequent agricultural depression.[68] It is against this backdrop that the election of 1937 would become a historical watershed as it took to unleash a new genre of provincial politics in Bengal which not only embodied an inversion of traditional power structure in favour of Muslims but even subversion of the Hindu social order with political emergence of low caste Hindus.

Interrogating Relevance of Caste in Transitioning Bengal Politics

The elections of 1937 led to a decisive victory for the Namasudras who managed to bag a consequential number of legislative seats and also became part of the newly formed

[68] See Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1986; Taj-ul-Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920-1947*, Westview Press: Boulder, USA, 1992, for in depth readings. Also to be discussed in the next chapter.

provincial government. With this, the event also marked a spectacular subversion of the Hindu caste hierarchy as the traditionally browbeaten, low castes not only claimed a share in the distribution of power but also emerged politically relevant. The Namasudras, by virtue of their numerical strength and articulate politics, continued to render themselves relevant to the political power equations in the state until 1947. The subsequent partition of Bengal resulted in their brutal marginalisation as their habitats became part of the Islamic state of Pakistan and much later they underwent forced migrations to India under perilous circumstances. Predictably, the political discourse of caste had to take a backseat in a post-colonial state reeling under the pains of a divided human geography as well as combustible communal hatred that encompassed all. But, while caste politics seemed to have lost much of its earlier edge, social validation of caste did not and in this sense, the struggles intrinsic to the 'doubly marginalised' Namasudra refugees became more difficult and elusive. The elections of 1967 that successfully toppled a long entrenched Congress in power with the formation of a United Front Government meant a hopeful metamorphosis once again, particularly with the rise of the Left. The formative years leading up to it indicated a growing disaffection of the 'marginalised' sections who took to assert themselves against the inconsistencies of a ruling system. To this extent, the thesis intends to explore and analyse the nuances of Namasudra politics in this period and their likely agency in predicating political changes that set in with the elections of 1967.

Of the extant works, Sekhar Bandopadhyay has extensively worked on Namasudras. His monograph, which ends with the partition in 1947, has deeply engaged with the nuances of Namasudra politics in the pre-partition period. From a state of political alienation maintained until early twentieth century Bandopadhyay identifies a trend of gradual integration of the Namasudras with mainstream nationalist politics from early 1940s that culminates in their unanimous support for the Congress in the elections of 1946.[69] In his later works, he has focussed more on the escalated efforts of communalising the Namasudra peasantry by the propagandist Hindu Mahasabha and other Hindu communal organisations.[70] From the 1930s onwards various Hindu organisations had undertaken to mobilise the lower castes 'in order to

[69] Sekhar Bandopadhay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*

[70] Sekhar Bandopadhay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony*; Also discussed in 'Mobilizing for a Hindu Homeland: Dalits, Hindu Nationalism and Partition in Bengal (1947)' in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato (eds.), *The Unfinished Agenda: Nation-Building in South Asia,* Manohar: New Delhi, 2001

thwart what was conceived of as a Muslim threat'.[71] These processes had much contributed to building binary communal oppositions of Hindu and Muslim brigades leading to much acrimony on the eve of partition. Sekhar Bandopadhyay has pointed out increased marginalisation of the autonomous trend of Scheduled Caste politics, with Jogendranath Mandal and his Ambedkarite group getting cornered by his own co-caste members who had aligned with the Congress as the question of the state's partition loomed large. More recently, Dwaipayan Sen has challenged this theory of marginalisation through magnifying the hidden nuances which could not have allowed political victory of the 'non-integrationists'. Tracing the political career of Jogrendranath Mandal, Sen in fact attempts a revisionist history of caste politics in twentieth century Bengal and seeks to find concrete reasons for the abatement of the caste question as the state transitioned from the colonial to the post-colonial.[72]

Since the Namasudras had been primarily an agricultural community, their political fortunes were closely linked with the state of agrarian politics in Bengal. Sugata Bose[73] and Partha Chatterjee[74] have pointed out particularly for eastern Bengal, how class conflicts between the land owning *zamindars* and the dependent peasants often coincided with social and religious antagonisms as peasants were mostly poorer Muslims and low caste Hindus, largely from the Namasudra caste, while the zamindars were predominantly upper caste Hindus. After the economic depression in the early 1930s had badly hit the rural-agrarian economy, Sugata Bose points out that a rupture occurred in the rural credit relations in eastern Bengal which had thrived on unequal, symbiotic social networks between the credit supplying *talukdars* and *mahajans* and the borrowing peasants. With the collapse of this network, the traditional credit suppliers who were also socially dominant classes lost their main source of influence over the peasant debtors. Taj-ul-Islam Hashmi[75] argues that the severance of this symbiotic relationship effectively changed the attitude of the peasantry, mostly Muslims, as it coincided with a shift in government policy from being 'pro-zamindar' and 'pro-Hindu' to becoming

[71] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony*, p.196. Hindu social organisations such as the Bharat Sevasram Sangha had been particularly proactive amongst the Namasudras, Poundra Kshatriyas and other lower caste groups in the districts of Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur and Bakarganj.
[72] Dwaipayan Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018
[73] Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*
[74] Partha Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*, OUP: New Delhi, 1997; Also, 'Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-1935', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 1982, pp.21-29
[75] T.I. Hashmi, Islam, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia*

'pro-peasants' and 'pro-Muslims' together with increased Islamisation of the peasants after the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movements. Eventually it propelled formation of Muslim peasant organizations, culminating in Fazul Huq's Praja Party in 1929. Joya Chatterji discusses emergence of the '*mofussil*' in Bengal's politics at this time, around the 1930s, which she says was largely propelled by two factors.[76] The first was the economic depression and concomitant crisis in agrarian production relations and the second was the growing influence of a newly enfranchised, rural electorate as a result of the reforms of 1935. It sets in perspective the rise of the *Praja* movement as both the Muslims and the Scheduled Castes, predominantly peasants, were benefitted by the extension of electoral rights and reservation of seats in the Bengal Legislature.

However, the last decade of colonial rule also saw a marked escalation of communalism and Rakesh Batabyal's nuanced study of the Bengal Famine in 1943 and its aftermath shows how the Hindu Mahasabha had made use of the opportunity to acquire a mass base in Bengal. The Party took a lead in accusing the Muslim League government in power of actually worsening the impact of famine through its administrative inefficacies and rampant corruption in its ranks by favouring the Muslim League supporters in various ways that acted detrimental to public interest. On one hand, the Mahasabha staged public demonstrations against the government and on the other it made deeper inroads into the rural areas via the party's famine relief works. Its organisational efforts towards consolidating the Hindu community in Bengal also meant mobilising the lower castes which constituted a sizeable part of the population.

Decisive 'shifts' in rural-agrarian alignments occurred as the cleavage between the Muslim and the low caste Namasudras took to widen. While the idea of Pakistan appealed to the Muslim peasantry on religious and economic grounds, the Namasudras were faced with economic emaciation during the famine of 1943, that too under a provincial government that was supported by their elected representatives. Communal propaganda by the Hindu fundamentalist organisations also acted as stimulants. And yet, there were occasions of class alliances as may be noticed during the Tebhaga movement of 1946. Adrienne Cooper's seminal study of the sharecroppers' struggles in Bengal highlights the complex dynamics of the Kisan Sabha movement in the rural hinterland of eastern and northern Bengal.[77] Apart

[76] Joya Chatterji, *Bengal divided*
[77] Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles in Bengal 1930-1950*, K.P. Bagchi and Company: Calcutta, 1988

from this, a section of the Namasudra leaders continued to emphasise on the merits of maintaining alliances with the Muslims in view of consolidating the 'minority' discourse. Political manifestations of the Namasudras during this period were therefore, far complex and layered.

When partition of Bengal happened in 1947, Namasudras like many other backward minority communities continued to stay in eastern Bengal which became part of Pakistan. They lacked both a literate consciousness to fathom the repercussions as well as necessary resources to contemplate migration by choice. However, faced with recurrent violence and discrimination in an Islamic state as the 'residual minority', given that the upper caste Hindu *bhadralok* had mostly migrated, the Namasudras were forcibly displaced and evicted much later and in phases. The experiences of religious persecution certainly had an impact on their identity consciousness that caused an overarching Hindu identity to take over their low caste status for the time being. Notwithstanding, their experiences of resettlement were distinctly different from that of the upper caste Hindus.

Prafulla Kumar Chakrabarti's otherwise celebratory account of the middle class squatter's movements whom he calls the dignified self-help groups also provides a glimpse of the agonising existence inside the refugee camps which sheltered those migrants who were poor, helpless and entirely dependent on state help. He largely considers the camp refugees as passive recipients of state rehabilitation and contrasts them with the show of active agency and agitation by the middle class groups. Although he does make reference to some of the *satyagrahas* fundamentally initiated by camp refugees against their unfavourable rehabilitation in Bettiah (Bihar) and opposing forced eviction to Dandakaranya, but these, he said, had failed to garner as much public support. [78] Of late, there has been more recognition of the 'differential' impact of partition on the socially stratified, Hindu minority in East Pakistan, with Joya Chatterji[79] making a significant pointer at how the brutality of the phenomenon was felt more down the social ladder.

[78] Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal,* Lumiere Books: Kalyani, 1990

[79] Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India. 1947-1967,* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007

Discussing the whimsical Dandakaranya experiment of the Union Government launched as an integrated project of rehabilitation cum development, Gyanesh Kudaisya[80] critically reflects upon the sheer perils of the poorer sections of the refugees, largely Namasudra agriculturalists, in undertaking resettlement outside West Bengal. In the post script to his second edition, Sekhar Bandopadhyay has engaged with the post-partition situation of the Namasudras to an extent. [81] In a fairly limited space he reflects upon the changed idioms of caste consciousness for the Namasudra refugees that affected their political orientations. But he largely ascertains for them a position of passivity and recoil as he describes Jogendranath Mandal's efforts to be an eventual failure while the Matua group withdrew from political activism to focus more on the social regeneration of the community. What Bandopadhyay tends to overlook in the process is the enduring will of the Namasudra refugees to assert themselves which needs to be understood not in terms of the outcomes but in terms of the limited and marginalised spaces within which they had to operate and yet they chose not to give up without a trial. In this sense, the recently published work of Uditi Sen[82] is quite nuanced as she tries to draw contrasts within the category, refugee, and ascertains the differential impact of rehabilitation policies on the different sections of refugees based on their caste, class and gender. Not only that, she explores the forms of divergent negotiation of the regime of rehabilitation by refugees from different class and caste backgrounds, which she does based on her interviews with Namasudra refugee-settlers of the Andaman Islands on one hand and on the other, through analysing the reminiscences and autobiographies of the middle class refugees who built the Bijoygarh squatters' colony in Calcutta.

Covering a temporal expanse of thirty years, between the elections of 1937 and 1967, which were of exceptional political consequences, this thesis has been divided into four chapters. It begins with the political entry of Namasudras into mainstream politics, post their electoral success in 1937. The first chapter seeks to discuss their political evolution(s) through complex interactions with the dominant forces of nationalism, communalism amidst transforming agrarian relations. The election of 1937 had potentially altered the status quo in Bengal as the Muslims along with the Scheduled Castes took to challenge the hegemony of the Hindu *bhadralok.* However, what seemed as a promising beginning could not yield much

[80] Tai Yong Tan, and Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, Routledge: London and New York, 2000
[81] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*
[82] Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018

political benefit for the SCs ultimately. As the leadership, particularly represented by Namasudras in the Assembly engaged in several trials of their political destinies through forming multiple alliances, the ordinary peasants had to encounter the daily existential hiccups of increased economic differentiation on one hand and communalisation on the other. Communalisation however, was not a one-sided phenomenon involving social appropriation of the lower castes by the militant Hindu organisations. There had been a simultaneous trend of increased Islamisation of the lower sections of the Muslim peasants as well. In fact, it was the raising of Pakistan demand and its active propaganda among the rural Muslims that sharpened the divide between both peasant communities, for while it meant solace and hope to the Muslim peasants, it could offer nothing to their Namasudra counterparts.

The second chapter engages with the ideological divergences within Namasudra politics. It acquired more distinctiveness after Ambedkar's establishment of the All India Scheduled Castes' Federation, which gave more coherence to the 'autonomous' assertions vis-à-vis the 'integrationist' alignments with the Congress. In Bengal, it acquired an acute dimension largely in the contest of debating the consequences of Partition for the Namasudras in particular since they lived in East Bengal. The divergence in perspective reached a climax with one of the protagonist leaders of the autonomous discourse, Jogendranath Mandal, deciding to join Pakistan. This chapter also seeks to reflect upon the post-Partition developments in East Bengal which became part of East Pakistan, focussing on the conditions of the low caste Hindu minority and the eventual disillusionment of Mandal.

The third chapter reflects upon the post-Partition, forced migrations of Namasudras from East Pakistan. Their experiences of dislocation had been distinct from the far less agonising experiences of the upper caste Hindus, thereby debunking any notion of refugees being a homogenous category. Ravinder Kaur's seminal work on the 'differing experiences of displacement' of the Punjabi refugees in Delhi based on caste, class and gender divisions provides a necessary methodological direction for a similar project to be undertaken in the East.[83] The chapter further engages in discussing the elusive yet enduring assertions of caste power by the Namasudras in their changed homelands.

[83] Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947: Partition Narratives among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi*, OUP: New Delhi, 2007

The fourth and final chapter attempts a case-study of a refugee settlement in Sakdaha, in the district of Nadia. It is a mixed caste settlement though Namasudras are fairly dominant. Through conversational interviews with the first generation settlers, the study engages in a qualitative-analytical method of exploring their distinctive refugee experiences as well as delineating the importance of caste in their memory.

In so far as sources are concerned, it has been a fairly uphill task to gather evidences for a comprehensive story. For the thesis, I have adequately studied both formalised sources of the government archives and newspaper records as well as non-formal sources. The social underclasses rarely find any definitive mention in government records, which has led me to also bank on alternative sources of oral narratives, personal collections and autobiographies. While the final chapter is a case study, based on personally conducted interviews in 2015, the thesis also makes reference to other published oral accounts of independent research projects. Personal collections of Jagadish Chandra Mandal, son of Jogendranath Mandal, one of the luminaries of the Namasudra movement and a consistent member of the provincial governments of undivided Bengal as well as a Minister in the Pakistan Government, are an extremely useful inventory of undiscovered documents. Some of these materials have also been published in the biographical series compiled by Jagadish Chandra Mandal. Apart from these, autobiographical writings by people from the Scheduled Caste society, a much recent genre in West Bengal, have been ventilators to suppressed and peripheral histories. There are of course epistemological problems in oral history as well and hence, the larger historiographical effort has been towards balancing both 'kinds' of sources.

The thesis does not purport to trace a linear development of a social movement. In fact it begins from the citadel when the Namasudras have already achieved some social distinctiveness and wished to carve out a political niche based on that. The central aim of this thesis is to investigate the dynamics of caste in the volatile atmosphere of political developments in Bengal during a by and large transitioning period.

Chapter 2

Dynamics of Caste in Transforming Regional Politics

Political rise of the Namasudras after the provincial elections of 1937 meant quite an unprecedented change in Bengal's politics as it inaugurated representational voices of the traditionally backward, Scheduled Caste communities into mainstream politics. The Namasudras had been at the vanguard of Scheduled Caste movement in the state and empowered by the constitutional reforms of the Government of India Act of 1935, they became crucial in the 'new' political climate. The reforms had significantly expanded the electorate and reserved 12% of the seats of Bengal legislature for the 'Depressed Classes'. Until then, the Namasudras, particularly under the influence of the *Matua* leader, Guruchand Thakur, had refrained from any nationalist participation.[1] After the election of 1937, the Namasudra representatives chose to ally with the coalition ministry of Krishak Praja Party and Muslim League based on a common 'peasant' class interest. This was however the beginning of a tumultuous political adventure, which would see the community through various contentious junctures until the country's independence which eventually came with the state's partition. It would be certainly erroneous to read this movement as politically homogenous, as the rhetoric of caste was invoked in more than one way, depending upon transforming agrarian relations in eastern Bengal and volatile state politics.

Agrarian crisis and emergence of 'new' politics

Primarily an agricultural community, the political rise and relevance of the Namasudras was closely related with the complex developments of an agrarian economy under a colonial system. The British land revenue system of Permanent Settlement had produced in Bengal an

[1] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, Second Edition, OUP: New Delhi, 2011

agrarian structure based on a complex hierarchy of proprietary and tenurial interests in land, with a range of intermediary tenures between the cultivating tenant and the revenue-paying zamindar, each claiming their share of the agricultural surplus.[2] The pattern of agrarian relations however, significantly varied with the different constituent regions of the state, particularly in so far as internal differentiation within the peasantry was concerned. Overtime, the peasantry had become generally subject to an increased scale of differentiation with the rise of a substantial and prosperous peasantry on one hand, and on the other, growing pauperization of the poorer peasantry who lost their rights of occupation over the lands they cultivated. This had become particularly rampant with the late nineteenth century introduction of commercial crops such as jute and rice, which had escalated indebtedness amongst the peasantry and led to effective transfer of land from the small to the larger peasantry. Partha Chatterjee argues that differentiation within the peasantry was more advanced in the south-western and northern districts of Bengal and comparatively much less in the eastern districts, where the small peasantry enjoyed a relatively viable economic status.[3] Here, 'a relatively undifferentiated peasantry' had been predominantly Muslims and low caste *Namasudras*, both highly oppressed by rich upper caste Hindus mostly comprising the *zamindar* class. Despite comparatively better economic conditions enjoyed by the peasantry of the eastern regions, this coincidence of an exploitative economic relationship with the dominant form of social hierarchy between the zamindars and the peasants caused much disaffection in the countryside.

In any case the dependency relationship of the peasantry with their proprietors was not only unequal but highly oppressive to the extent of impoverishment with a large volume of 'unauthorised' secondary services demanded of the tillers that were exacted above the legal rent. This included a vast range of illegal cesses or *abwab* demanded under various pretexts of agricultural production. In the Namasudra dominant region of Bakarganj, *abwabs*

[2] For an in depth reading on establishment of the Permanent Settlement revenue arrangement in Bengal see Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*, Duke University Press: Durham, 1996. Also see Peter Robb (ed.), *Meanings of Agriculture: Essays in South Asian History and Economics*, OUP: Delhi, 1996.

[3] Preponderance of a small peasantry holding less than two acres each was much higher in the districts of eastern Bengal, especially Dacca, Faridpur, Bakarganj, Chittagong, Tippera, Noakhali, and Pabna, than elsewhere. The proportion of agricultural labour to the total population was highest in the districts of southwestern and northern Bengal and lowest in east Bengal as per the Survey and Settlement Reports of 1931. See Partha Chatterjee, 'Bengal Politics and the Muslim Masses, 1920-47', in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilization, Oxford in India Readings: Themes in Indian History*, OUP: New Delhi, 2001, pp. 263-265. For a brief overview of the different forms of agrarian relations prevalent in various parts of Bengal, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism*, OUP: New Delhi, 1997, pp. 47-67

constituted about one-fourth or even more of the rental. The peasants here often had to pay higher amounts of illegal cesses to the zamindars than the neighbouring district of Noakhali, where the peasants enjoyed comparative autonomy.[4] Since these abwabs were also claimed in the name of religious and ceremonial expenses, they became a source of conflict between the zamindar and his tenantry who belonged to divergent religious community or caste. Often these illegal claims even tended to exceed the actual payable rental. This apart in Dacca, tenant-cultivators had to offer *begar* or free labour to their landlords. The practice of moneylending indispensable for agricultural production and also for the payment of various claims increased the scale of peasant indebtedness much due to the appalling rates of interest at which money was lent. Most of these moneylenders being local Hindu zamindars or *talukdars* and traditional *mahajans* or the outsider, *Marwari* merchants who had entered the rural scene of East Bengal particularly after the boom in jute production, indicate how 'usurious and commercial exploitation of the peasantry was generally perceived as inseparably linked with feudal exploitation, typified in cultural terms by upper-caste or trading-caste Hindu domination.'[5] Thus, the recurring demands of the peasant movement through the 1920s, in eastern Bengal had been for the abolition of illegal exactions or *abwabs*, reduction of rent, reduction of interest rates and relief from indebtedness, honourable treatment of the tenants in the zamindar's *cutcheries* and abolition of fee on transfer of cultivable lands[6], which in due course intensified towards a general demand for abolition of zamindari system during the 1930s under the impact of the world economic depression.

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[4] Settlement Survey Report, Bakarganj, in Taj-ul-Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920-1947*, Westview Press: Boulder, USA, 1992, p. 38

[5] Partha Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*, p.60. In another essay, Partha Chatterjee elucidates the basic contradiction in the agrarian structure of eastern Bengal in ideological terms, as a tension between a peasant community and a feudal power seeking to dominate, being more distinctly identifiable in cases where the feudal power is clearly an 'outsider' who is racially or culturally distinct from the mass of his peasantry. The contradiction would be a lot less apparent in cases where certain elements from within the peasant community have on the basis of certain 'privileges' reached a position of appropriating a surplus from the producers and compelling obedience by the use or threat of use of physical force. Thus, in the agrarian relations of eastern Bengal, the crucial element which deflected peasant agitations into anti-Hindu movements was not that most zamindars were Hindu and that the grievances were of the predominantly Muslim tenantry which undertook anti-Hindu overtones, but the fact that the Muslim rent-receivers, where they existed, were considered a part of the peasant community where as Hindu zamindars, talukdars and moneylenders and traders were not. See Partha Chatterjee, 'Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926- 1935', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 1982, pp.21-29

[6] As Taj-ul-Islam Hashmi poignantly describes the treatment meted out to the Muslim and Namasudra tenants who were considered 'nothing more than servants, untouchables and "even as livestock".' Most of the times in the zamindars' *cutcheries* or courts, there were different types of sitting arrangements such that only the upper caste Hindus were allowed to sit on a chair while the tenants of all other categories, Muslims and low caste Hindus had to sit on the floor, mats or benches. These tenants were not allowed to wear shoes within the cutcheries or ride horses or elephants within the demesne of the Hindu zamindar. Hashmi in fact refers to an inglorious incident in Jessore to depict the extent of servility of the Muslim tenants, where the latter had to offer their head for the zamindar to rub the soles of his feet, in order to relieve an itch caused by the marshy soil. See

The depression of 1931-32 significantly transformed the agrarian system of eastern Bengal, particularly when the profitable jute economy crashed. The sudden slump in prices had crippled the smaller peasants who depended on their marginal share of profits for sustenance. A highly capital-intensive crop, cultivation of jute essentially thrived on the constant flow of rural credit supplied by the *dadani* merchants associated with the jute exporting firms of Calcutta. As, such loans were provided on unregulated and exorbitant rates of interest, it entrenched the peasants further in the vicious cycle of debt. But the sudden collapse of jute trade leading to over-production and an unprecedented fall in prices severely affected the peasants who defaulted on paying their loans and found themselves incapable of meeting their customary obligations. It led to a credit crisis in the rural market as the dadani sources chose to recede from offering further loans, while the traditional moneylenders, the talukdars and mahajans afflicted by the depression slump also failed to supply any credit. With the rural credit 'drying up', the impact was catastrophic for the peasantry, particularly for the small-holding occupancy cultivators who were coerced to sell their lands to meet their debts. The economic depression of 1930s thus resulted in enormous loss of landholdings, increased fragmentation and transfer of lands and even rise in sharecropping. Sugata Bose in fact identifies dwindling influence of the traditionally dominant class of zaminadars and talukdar-mahajans around this time with a rupturing of the existing symbiotic but unequal social relations. As their chief mode of surplus appropriation through debt-interest collapsed, they withdrew from playing a role in the reproductive process and thereby lost their main source of influence over the peasant debtors.[7] This propelled peasant resistance particularly when the landlords insisted on the payment of rent and interest.

Massive dislocation precipitated by economic depression however led to a substantive restructuring of the agrarian order with the rise of a new elite. The *jotedars* or rich peasants

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Taj-ul-Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia*, pp. 44-45. Such was the extent of humiliation endured by the tenant-peasants, where economic extortion was carried out with cultural stigmatisation and inhuman behaviour. It is only understandable why the aggrieved peasants would avenge all exploitation under the subsequent 'change' in circumstances, be it in terms of favourable political atmosphere or agrarian transformation.

[7]Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1986, pp.181-182. Joya Chatterji however, debunks Bose's argument that the zamindars' dominance had been ubiquitous in eastern Bengal districts until the onset of economic depression in early 1930s. On the contrary, she points out that most of the big zamindars were in fact 'absentees' living in Calcutta and their estates impoverished by litigation and wasteful expenditure. With the zamindars hardly staying in their rural demesne, it would not have been possible for them to acquire a profitable income through rural credit as Sugata Bose claims. Thus she says that the big zamindari estates were getting weaker and poorer much before the thirties. See Joya Chatterji, *Bengal divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1994, pp. 77-82

being largely self-sufficient had managed to fare better from the agricultural slump; took advantage of the 'no-rent complex' in the countryside to refrain from paying their dues to the superiors; became the new suppliers of credit in the absence of traditional moneylenders and; amassed huge properties through acquiring the landholdings sold off by the small peasants in debt. As the old order looked to crumble, these 'better-off' peasant groups loomed large in the countryside. When the dominant antagonism was against the upper caste Hindu zamindars, these newly emergent vanguards could easily mobilise a *praja* solidarity playing upon an ideological amalgam of economic and cultural discontentment. This came to be adequately represented in the political alliance formed between the low caste Namasudras and Muslims in eastern Bengal.

Agrarian crisis of the depression years met with increased politicisation of the countryside, with politics being made more representative after the passage of the Government of India Act of 1935. The reforms had substantively expanded the rural electorate through grant of suffrage rights and heavy weightage of rural seats in the Legislature, thereby shifting the fulcrum of politics from the urban to the rural. While the Muslims got 119 seats in the Legislature to be returned by separate Muslim electorate, the Scheduled Castes became entitled to 30 seats after the Poona Pact of September 24, 1932 when a compromise was reached against the Communal Award of separate electorate for the SCs between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Since both the communities were predominantly rural and peasant-based the *praja* movement which sought to focus on specific peasant issues gathered significant momentum. The founding conference was in fact organised in the Namasudra dominant area of Bakarganj, where apart from the Muslim Praja leaders, Namasudra representatives like Jogendranath Mandal and Lalit Kumar Bal addressed the crowd. The movement gradually spread in various districts of eastern Bengal with the establishment of local *praja samitis*, which were eventually integrated under the banner of Nikhil Banga Praja Samiti in 1929, later rechristened as Krishak Praja Party (KPP) in 1936. The tenants' grievances of the depression years had particularly fed into the popularity of the movement.

As a result of a political understanding with the KPP which did not contest for the Scheduled Caste seats, as many as thirteen Namasudra candidates got elected in the general elections of 1937. Barring one Congress supporter, Rasiklal Biswas, the rest who had won as independent candidates decided to enter into a political alliance with the coalition government of the KPP and the Muslim League. The Namasudra alliance was largely formed based on a common

class agenda with the KPP which had quintessentially rallied for the cultivators' concern. The election manifesto of the Krishak Praja Party was clearly about an economic '*dal-bhat'* agenda, demanding abolition of zamindari without compensation, reduction of rents on land, abolition of all forms of illegal exactions such as *nazar-salami* and *abwab* and establishment of Debt Settlement Boards to resolve peasant indebtedness.[8]

However, political alliance based on common opposition to an oppressive zamindari system was certainly not without its inherent contradiction. The camaraderie was more tactical and catering to immediate economic grievances than being deep-seated or long-term for relations between the Namasudras and the Muslims had been quite volatile. Despite being equally exploited and deprived by the Hindu landlords and traders, the Muslims and the Namasudras could not have intimately bonded given their mutual disregard for each other, when one group looked down upon the other as more inferior. Repeated occasions of riots between the two communities in 1911, 1913 and 1923 depicted under-currents of communal animosity, as in all cases minor skirmishes between individuals would invariably fuel mobilisation of both communities against one another.[9] These violent encounters are often interpreted as politically motivated.[10] But the existence of a cultural chasm between the two peasant communities was undeniable, particularly when both had been aspiring for social and political upliftment.[11] Also, increased politicisation of the rural community led to further

[8] For the election manifesto of the KPP during the 1937 election see Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937-1947*, Impex India: New Delhi, 1976, pp. 79-80.

[9] As the District Magistrate of Jessore had reported on the 1911 riots between the Namasudras and the Muslims: 'The hatred was due to a feeling rather than material matters'. The riot which began as a minor skirmish soon escalated into a violent outburst involving both communities on either sides. It happened simultaneously in the contiguous districts of Jessore, Khulna and Faridpur. The overall reason for growing animosity had been increased instances of self-assertion by the Namasudra villagers emboldened by the *Matua* movement of social upliftement, which was not received well by the Muslims who had considered the Namasudras inferior. The latter had in fact publicly voiced their disdain in a local paper when the barbers had been allowed by the superior caste Hindus to provide services to the Namasudras. The riots of 1923 also occurred under similar circumstances, only this time, communal mobilisation of the Muslims during the Khilafat- Non-Cooperation movement led them into a confrontation with the Namasudras. For a detailed understanding of the riots read Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*. Also, see Sekhar Bandopadhyay, 'Community Formation and Communal Conflict: Namasudra-Muslim Riot in Jessore-Khulna', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 25, no. 46, (Noember 17, 1990)

[10] Taj-ul-Islam Hashmi however prefers to read these riots as 'not communal by nature'. The early 1920s riots in Faridpur and Jessore between the Namasudras and the Muslims, he says were stimulated by a political difference between the two communities as the Namasudras had opposed the Non-Cooperation movement which the Muslims supported. Relations between the two communities had improved after the movement came to a close. See Taj-ul-Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia*, pp. 99-100

[11] In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, movements of social reform had resulted in an articulate community consciousness among the Bengali Muslims and the Namasudras, both of whom had been treated as down-trodden. The respective attempts towards self-respect and social upliftment often led to fundamentalisation of community identities, which often instigated clashes with the adjacent 'other' community/communities, when each considered themselves to be superior to the other and every attempt was

social polarisation as the economically oriented *Praja* movement could not have avoided an eventual communalisation given its rivalry with the Muslim League (ML) to acquire the rural Muslim vote.[12] Although both parties appealed to Muslim membership, by and large they catered to different class interests such that the Krishak Praja Party had been more grounded while the Muslim League was aristocratic. Nevertheless, since the vanguards of KPP were often Muslim jotedars, it was only natural that when confronted with exigency the party would readily resort to a communal agenda.

The new scope of representative politics in Bengal also posed potent challenges for the mainstream political parties coveting a secure foundation in the province. With the political vantage obtained by the Muslims through securing majority seats in the Legislature and election through separate electorate, it drove the Muslim League to make inroads and seek a formidable constituency. Hassan Ispahani, one of the richest Muslim businessmen of Bengal had invited Jinnah in August 1936 to resolve the schism between Krishak Praja Party and the newly formed, more elite United Muslim Party with the intention of projecting a consolidated front in the upcoming elections. The KPP, however more intent on pressing economic demands, rebuffed Jinnah's call for a Muslim solidarity particularly on the deadlock over abolition of zamindari without compensation. The United Muslim Party whole-heartedly joined the Muslim League to establish the Bengal Provincial Muslim League while the KPP chose to remain outside it. In the elections of 1937 both parties fought as political rivals. As the Congress was not contesting any of the Muslim seats the electoral struggle became one in which the two Muslim majority parties 'pitted their rhetoric and programmes against each other' rather than competing with the rival Hindu or secular parties like the Hindu Mahasabha and the Congress. Both were competing to represent the 'true' interest of the Muslims of Bengal. While Fazlul Huq carried his campaign on an economic 'dal-bhaat' agenda, the Muslim League campaign appealed to the notion of Muslim unity and welfare of the Muslim community as a whole.[13] Joya Chatterji points out a highly 'differentiated' Muslim outlook,

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made to protect the honour of their communities. Read Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*. For a broader perspective on impact of social reform movements and the resultant essentialisation of identities of indigenous groups, read Kenneth Jones, *Socio- Religious Reform Movements in British India, The New Cambridge History of India*, Part 3, Vol. 1, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1989.

[12] For the electoral competition between the provincial Muslim League and the Krishak Praja Party read Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*.

[13] Matters came to a head over the historic election results in Patuakhali which was a considerably disturbed constituency in terms of having witnessed repeated cases of communal conflicts, and where despite active propaganda by the Muslim League and strong candidature of Nazimuddin supported by the Nawab of Dacca, Fazlul Huq had a clear victory based on his economic agenda. One of his major election campaigns challenging

at least in the beginning, through highlighting the internal division in Muslim leadership, which contradicts the 'homogenous' stereotype upheld by Rajat Kanta Ray and Ratnalekha Ray that the conflict between a Hindu zamindar and a Muslim jotedar had fed into the separatist movement of the Muslims in Bengal as a whole, which ultimately led to the partition of Bengal in 1947.[14]

For the Congress in Bengal, the reforms of 1935 had significantly jeopardised the party's political stake in the province. As its members were overwhelmingly from upper caste Hindu *bhadralok* having largely retained connections with landed interests either as absentee zamindars or having rentier interests of one kind or another, it was indeed difficult for the party to rally with radical peasant demands. Unequivocal opposition of the Bengal Congress to the Tenancy Amendment Bill of 1928 only ratifies this fact. Economic distress of the Depression years made matters worse as it widened the rift between social classes. Confrontation over non-payment of rent and customary obligations would often lead to violence between Hindu zamindars and Muslim and low caste Namasudra peasants, which despite a communal orientation had been undeniably economic. The Congress certainly found itself in quandary over the irresolvable issues of rampant social and ideological divisions in the state. It was particularly detrimental to its political ambitions at a time when the electoral arithmetic had changed substantially. With the competing claims of the Krishak Praja Party and the Muslim League, the Congress could not find much leeway with the Muslim votes and as for obtaining the much needed Scheduled Caste votes, it could not pursue beyond reformist drives for elimination of untouchability and temple-entry.

This apart, the party also became embroiled in reactionary politics over the implications of Communal Award, which had eclipsed political importance of the *bhadralok* in the politics of the state. The vociferous appeals, whether submitted as memoranda to Lord Zetland, Secretary of State, or published in the local newspapers, expressed the anger and frustration

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the Muslim League is adequately representative of this: 'It is not all a civil war in the Muslim community but it is a fight in which the people of Bengal are divided on a purely economic issue. This issue must be decided first before we take up any other matter for consideration… The problem of "dal and bhat" and some kind of coarse cloth to cover our nudity is the problem of problems which stares us in the face and which must be solved immediately. This is the very problem which we will have to face as soon as we enter the Council. An obvious and immediate solution to the problem will be by effecting drastic economy in the cost of administration, by reduction of taxations on the poor, by repeal of such taxation as tells heavily on the masses and by a thorough overhauling of the Bengal Tenancy Act and other Acts in the interest of the raiyats. To all these measures zamindars, capitalists and those holding vested interest will offer strenuous opposition.' *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, December 16, 1936.

[14]Joya Chatterji, *Bengal divided*, pp.74-84

of the *bhadralok* over their shrinking powers. To this extent, it also prompted the aggrieved *bhadralok* to dissolve older differences of ideology and political alignments to share a common platform, even with the Hindu communal leaders as well as the loyalists.[15] The arguments posited in defence of a Hindu community-under-attack, as a 'Hindu national protest' or the projected claims of a Hindu 'cultural superiority' vis-à-vis the Muslims, was certainly more rhetorical than being actually 'inclusive'. For the *bhadralok* did not seem to appreciate the political agency that the Award granted to the otherwise under-represented 'depressed classes' within the Hindu society, occupying its bottom layer. This became conspicuous by their open denouncement of the Poona Pact which had drastically reduced the proportion of caste Hindu seats in the legislature: '… And to add to our distress Mr. Gandhi gives away 30 of the above mentioned 80 seats on the Bengal Legislative Council to the so-called depressed classes in Bengal and the Premier promptly promulgates his acceptance of this act of Gandhian charity!'[16] The Namasudras and Rajbanshis were particularly targeted and disparaged for their newly acquired political advantage[17]. These politically conscious low caste communities seeking social mobility had remained distant and even critical of the *bhadralok*-led-nationalist politics in Bengal. The Congress certainly had to pay for this overt show of disdain with its noticeable failure in the Scheduled Caste seats constituencies, in the elections of 1937.[18]

Although the Bengal Congress at that time was dominated by a conservative clique, nevertheless the party also saw significant radicalism enter its ranks during the depression years which found a vent in the Civil Disobedience agitations. The *krishak samities* active in the countryside, particularly with the prevailing agrarian distress and the consequent surge in peasant grievances, were often channelized for nationalist activities. These samities had close links with the radical leaders of the Congress. The Tippera Krishak Samiti was significantly

[15] The office bearers of the Bengal Anti-Communal Award Movement included among its ranks prominent Bengali Congressmen such as Nalinakshya Sanyal, Tulsi Charan Goswami and Debendra Lal Khan, Hindu Sabha leaders such as Radha Kumud Mookerji and B.C. Chatterjee, along with the loyalist Maharaja of Burdwan as Chairman of the Committee and Rabindranath Tagore as the President. See *Bengal Anti-Communal Award Movement: A Report*, Calcutta, 1939

[16] Zetland Papers, Memorandum submitted entitled, 'The Betrayal of Britain and Bengal', Mss Eur D604 vol. 21 to 22, NAI, p.41

[17] Zetland Papers, 'Who are the Depressed Classes in Bengal? What is their number?' Note prepared from the writings of Mr. Hirendra Nath Datta, President Hindu Sabha of Calcutta and Sir N.N. Sircar, Advocate General of Bengal, and circulated at the instance of Hindu Sabha, British Indian Association, and Indian Association of Calcutta, Mss Eur D 609/21 (h) B, p.157

[18] In Bengal, Congress secured only 7 out of 30 Scheduled Caste seats in Bengal. See Memorandum by Government of India on Indian Provincial Elections, Cabinet Papers, No. 24/269, 19th May, 1937, in P.N. Chopra (ed.), *Towards Freedom, 1937-47, Experiment with Provincial Autonomy, 1 January- 31 December 1937,* New Delhi: ICHR, 1985

revitalised by Mukleshwar Rahman, a close ally of the local Congress leader Ashrafuddin Ahmed Chaudhuri, to mobilise the Muslim peasantry of the region for the Civil Disobedience movement.[19] The mid-thirties in fact saw a swell of communist ideas in the party leadership with the return of the ex-detenues, after the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 1931, who became inspired by Marxism while in detention, as well as the Communist Party's adoption of a 'United Front' strategy in 1935 which enabled young communists to work with the Congress. Also, with the 1935 reforms in perspective, the Lucknow Session of the Indian National Congress held in April 1936 under the presidentship of Jawaharlal Nehru upheld socialist ideals and the need to undertake land reforms. This gave a further boost to the peasant organisations of the countryside. The Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha was thus established to revitalise a *krishak* movement for nationalist purposes, with its first conference held in Hatgobindapur in Burdwan in March, 1937. It essentially gave a platform to the radical groups associated with Bengal Congress to represent the interests of the peasants. Thus, with a palpable dichotomy in the ideological currents flowing within the Bengal Congress, with an entrenched landed group on one hand and a radical one on the other, the party found itself in a dilemma.

The agrarian crisis of the 1930s had not only overhauled an old prevalent system of economic relations in the countryside but also unleashed peasant *jacqueries* which stimulated the rise of 'new' political processes. It also coincided with the strengthening of a class of politically ambitious rich peasantry. However, regional politics had to become really representative with the enlargement of electorate and politicisation of the rural areas on grounds of both class and community. As the new political climate claimed to be 'inclusive' for the 'under-represented' sections the Namasudras, driven by both economic interest and a zest to seek redress for the social wrongs, readied to take a leap, to claim their share of political power. The general elections of 1937 may be interpreted as a watershed in this sense.

[19] In Khulna, *krishak samities* were established in various parts of the district on communist lines while in Tippera, the local *krishak* movement seemed to have coalesced completely with the Congress. Almost every meeting was addressed by Congress leaders, and many of the resolutions passed were approximate to those which emanated from purely Congress gatherings. See Report on the political situation in Bengal for the first half of the month of June, 1937, Fortnightly Report, Government of India, Home (Pol), File no. 18/6/1937 (Poll), p.8

Making Scheduled Caste demands and trials of political destiny

Krishak Praja Party premier, Fazul Huq formed a new provincial government in coalition with the Muslim League in April 1937, supported by 25 Scheduled Caste MLAs who had won as independent candidates. With 13 elected members, the political stake of the Namasudras had been considerable in this alliance, with one of its candidates, Jogendranath Mandal, having won from the general seat in Bakarganj, Barisal.[20] The politically articulate community also found representation in the new cabinet as one of its veteran leaders, Mukunda Behari Mullick became Minister in charge of Co-operative Credit and Rural Indebtedness Department. Apart from him, Prasanna Deb Raikut, another Scheduled Caste representative from the Rajbanshi community had been included as the Minister of Forests and Excise. It was certainly a promising beginning for the Scheduled Caste community in general and Namasudras in particular. The precise expectation of the Scheduled Castes from the newly formed government was made known at the outset:

> Sir, as children of the soil these people have a natural right to have a share in the administration of the land. This will not only increase their status and responsibility but will also serve as an encouragement for further progress. We therefore demand that an adequate percentage should be set apart in the services under the State for our qualified men. We also demand an adequate representation on the Local Bodies. Our local needs can be tackled through these bodies and they will also provide ample opportunities for training in the art of self-government. We also demand an adequate representation in the constitution of the universities and employment of our qualified men in the services under their control. Sufficient stipends and scholarship should also be provided for our deserving boys for education in the Province and also abroad. Last but not the least, Sir, the landlaws [sic] of Bengal are causing great anxiety to our people. We, as raiyats, have been hard hit by their application. Sir, a drastic revision of the reactionary portions of the laws is long overdue.[21]

[20] Jogendranath Mandal despite being a Scheduled Caste from the Namasudra community had won from Bakarganj North-East General Constituency against Mr. Saral Kumar Dutta, a popular leader of Congress and nephew of the deceased leader, Ashwini Kumar Dutta. Mandal defeated Dutta having secured 12,069 votes while the latter got 10,653 votes. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, January 28, 1937

[21] Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings (BLAP), Bengal Government Press: Alipore, August 5, 1937, p.209

This speech made by Pulin Behari Mullick, brother of Mukunda Behari Mullick in the Bengal Assembly on August 5, 1937 was clearly indicative of the 'specific' demands of the community, i.e. seeking representation in government institutions and services; educational aid and; agrarian reforms for a by and large peasant community. The underlying rationale of their allegiance towards the new government was contingent on the fulfilment of these demands.

However, soon after assuming office the ministry became embroiled in a political crisis. As leader of a *krishak* movement, Fazlul Huq was prompt in undertaking a host of legislative measures for the peasants' benefit at large. Apparently, his avowed commitment towards the peasantry had in fact prevented a pre-election rapprochement with the Congress to materialize into a political alliance, and had forced him to ally with his rival, Muslim League instead.[22] The Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Act, immediate implementation of the Bengal Agricultural Debtors Act of 1935 through setting up of Debt Settlement Boards in all districts and, the Bengal Moneylenders Act were all aimed to ameliorate the deplorable condition of peasants. But these measures largely fell short of benefitting the lower rungs of the peasantry, particularly the share-croppers/*bargadars* and under-raiyats. The blatant inadequacies of particularly the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Act were highlighted by the Congress party in opposition, which it said had failed to protect the rights of the 'under-ryots'. Sarat Chandra Bose as Leader of the Opposition said that the Bill was 'hasty and ill-considered piece of legislation, inadequate for the purpose for which it was intended, and hypocritical because it pretended to remove the grievances of the actual tillers of the soil, many of whose disabilities it totally ignored.' Pointing out the insufficiencies of the Bill, it was stated that its amending clauses neither made provision for suspension of rents paid by the lesser peasantry nor provided them with any occupancy rights.[23] Although, criticism of the Tenancy Amendment Act led the Congress to face considerable flak, particularly by the Muslim League who portrayed the party's stand as being both anti-peasant as well as anti-Muslim since a substantial section of the peasantry in Bengal had been Muslims, nevertheless, it did highlight

[22] Discussions on KPP and Congress allying to form a coalition government reached a deadlock over the issue of release of political prisoners. While Congress wanted it to be the first priority to the extent that the ministry would resign if the demand was not met, KPP felt that it would mean betraying the more important peasant causes to which it was ideologically committed. So, what KPP wanted was that the ministry would enact some legislations for peasants and then raise the issue of release of political prisoners. This being unacceptable to the Congress, the alliance ultimately failed to fructify.

[23] *Advance*, Town Edition, October 6, 1937, p.3 in *All India Congress Committee (AICC) Papers*, 1st Instalment, File No. P-5 (Pt. I)- 1937, NMML

the fundamental inconsistency of the Act and the obvious gesture to benefit the rich and the more secured sections of peasants. A simultaneous growth of dissidence occurred within Huq's own party with increased alienation of his own members who alleged that his cabinet was overwhelmingly *zamindar* in composition.[24] With the ranks of Opposition swelling, it led Fazlul Huq to depend on the Muslim League for political survival. And this was sealed with Huq finally joining the League at its annual session in Lucknow in October 1937.

Disenchantment with the Huq ministry also gripped the Scheduled Caste representatives in a fundamental way which provoked dissension in their ranks on continuation of support to the government. Members of the Calcutta Scheduled Caste League, in a statement published by its Secretary, enumerated the major grievances of the Scheduled Castes towards the ministry.[25]

1. Primary education without taxation has not been introduced.
2. The question of reduction of the burden of heavy taxation has been shelved. The idea of fixing the minimum price for jute and other agricultural produces has been thrown to the winds. The Ministry produced the Bengal Tenancy Amendment Bill and that too could not a find a place in the Statute Book due to the weak and cowardly attitude of the Ministry.
3. The question of retrenchment of expenditure has also been shelved and instead the amount of salaries and allowances has mounted.
4. The problem of Dal-Bhat of the poor peasantry in Bengal has not been solved.
5. It was circulated that 5 lacs of rupees would be spent for the education of the Scheduled Castes but it has so far proved to be a huge bluff.

Many Scheduled Caste MLAs who had supported the coalition ministry claimed a serious contradiction between what they had expected of the government and what had been ultimately delivered. In view of this a legislative alliance of SC members within the Bengal Legislature was formed called the Independent Scheduled Caste Party. A joint meeting of the All Bengal Scheduled Castes Federation and the Calcutta Scheduled Castes League was held on July 26, 1938 to discuss 'ways and means of achieving unity among the Scheduled Caste members of the Bengal Legislature' in order to effectively work towards the interests of the community in a more unanimous manner. The meeting was attended by MLAs, Hemchandra

[24] As many as 9 out of 11 members were from the zamindar class. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, March 31, 1937
[25] *Hindusthan Standard*, August 8, 1938

Naskar, Rasiklal Biswas, Kshetra Mohan Singh, Pushpajit Burman and Jogendranath Mandal. The meeting also appointed a sub-committee of five members to prepare a set of draft rules and lay down a programme of work- members were Pushpajit Biswas, Kshetra Mohan Singh, Haran Chandra Burman, Jagneswar Mandal and Jogendranath Mandal. [26]

Dissent with the government led the dissident group of Scheduled Caste leaders draw closer to the Congress in Opposition. This was largely due to the 'inclusive' overtures made by the Bose brothers, with Subhas Chandra Bose, President of the Indian National Congress at that time, making focussed efforts to address the prominent Scheduled Caste organisations particularly the more articulate Namasudra community. While definitive approaches were made to include the *Matua* group with Pramatha Ranjan Thakur as the descendant of the deceased reformer, Guruchand Thakur, independent vanguards like Jogendranath Mandal were also greatly influenced.[27] However, this hardly led to any kind of political assimilation with the Congress. When Mandal along with the 'chosen' Scheduled Caste leaders were invited to the residence of Sarat Chandra Bose for a meeting with Gandhi in March, 1938, he clearly expressed his anxiety over Congress being predominantly upper-caste and hence his apprehension of establishing faith with the party.[28] This is why the Independent Scheduled Caste Party had insisted on remaining separate from Congress in the Bengal Legislature and had refused a 'merger' despite affirming their political support.[29] Political alliance with Congress was more of a strategic necessity while adherence to political separated-ness in the Assembly showed an inherent reservation of the Scheduled Castes towards assimilation.[30]

[26] *Hindusthan Standard*, July 27, 1938

[27] A large number of influential Congress leaders along with the Congress President, Subhas Chandra Bose, had attended a meeting commemorating the death anniversary of Guruchand Thakur, the reformist leader of Namasudras of the *Matua* order, in which his endeavours at uplifting the downtrodden community were acknowledged and emphasised. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, March 15, 1938. Mandal's growing closeness with Bose brothers has been emphasised by Jagadish Chandra Mandal in conversations about his father. He also mentions it in his biographical work on his father, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, Vol. 1, Chaturtha Duniya: Calcutta, 1975, p.49

[28] The conversation happened between Gandhi and the SC leaders of Bengal who were invited to Sarat Bose's house for a meeting, mentioned by Upendranath Burman in his autobiography, *Uttor Banglar shekel o amar jobon smriti*, in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, ibid., p. 51

[29] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, August 18, 1938.

[30] Here Sekhar Bandopadhyay's argument has been contradicted, who prefers to call the alliance with Congress as political opportunism by the Namasudra leaders. Bandopadhyay's attempt to trace an increasing trend of 'integrationist' politics pursued by Namasudras around this time certainly misses the fact that it was a strategic necessity of the SC leaders to align with the Congress at that time. For Bandopadhyay's argument see *Caste, Protest and Identity*, P. 185

An official withdrawal of support occurred with staging No-Confidence motions on August 2, 1938 initiated by two iconic Namasudra leaders, Jogendranath Mandal and Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, who would eventually part ways much later. The motion was defeated by 130 against 111 votes, with a highly unwieldy Fazlul Huq ministry making a narrow escape owing to the 23 votes given by the European group.[31] For Mandal, it had been a difficult decision to oppose Fazlul Huq since both belonged to the same district of Barisal and had also shared a political platform. While positing concrete reasons of 'no-confidence' in the end[32], Mandal had certainly made his speech full of emotional rhetoric for failure of his expectations by Huq.

> He had aroused great hopes and great expectations when he acclaimed himself as the champion of the depressed and down-trodden peasants of Bengal. He had proclaimed from sky-scraper his virtuous intention of liquidating an iniquitous and unjust land system waging relentless crusade against the landlords and Zamindars. But to-day I stand disillusioned. He had treated his election promises like love pledges without the slightest intention of translating them into practice. To our eternal shame and disgrace he has found his most congenial allies in the cream of Bengal aristocracy whose heads he had only a few months before demanded on the charger. To-day his last mask has fallen off and we find him in strange surroundings amid strange bed fellows, I for one can never be a party to the unholy Compact like this. The Cabinet is a medley for interests uniting only on the common ground of exploitation of the poor…[33]

An additional reason of indignation had been the presence of two Scheduled Caste Ministers in the cabinet who had failed to deliver much for their community. Thus No-Confidence motions against individual ministers were directed against Mukunda Behari Mullick and Prasanna Deb Raikut with Pramatha Ranjan Thakur denouncing them as 'nothing but luxury'.[34] Both ministers had been vehemently criticised for their alleged inactivity and lack of concrete initiative despite handling departments of rural importance and especially when majority of the Scheduled Castes had been embroiled in crucial agrarian problems of indebtedness and lack of rural credit. Mullick had in fact already faced earlier allegations of

[31] *Hindusthan Standard*, August 9, 1938
[32] The reasons of 'No-Confidence' were lack of effective implementation of the Tenancy Amendment Bill; non-introduction of free education; deepening problem of rural credit supply and unethical increase in costs of administration.
[33] BLAP, August 10, 1938, p.122
[34] Ibid, August 10,1938, p. 119-121

negligence towards making requisite appointments of Scheduled Caste candidates for the posts of Inspectors and Auditors in his own department.[35]

Throughout the Assembly sessions, the Scheduled Caste leaders had consistently raised the issue of their appointments and representations in the various departments and services of the government as well as made demands for educational aids and opportunities, which they thought were intrinsically linked with the larger social and economic problems of their community. While education would ensure their upliftment, adequate representation in government bodies would not only mean a rise in social standards but would also make these public institutions more receptive to the needs of the downtrodden masses. And given the fact that such necessities were not being fulfilled by the current ministry, it only explained their consequent 'shift' of political allegiance towards Congress.[36]

As part of the Opposition, it also provided an optimal ground to argue the 'specific' agricultural problems, more critically in light of the lacunae in government policy. Thus Jogendranath Mandal put the issue of rural credit into perspective in an Assembly session on March 15, 1939 where in he pointed out with reference to the Namasudra dominant areas of North Bakarganj and South Faridpur, more specifically the Madaripur and Gopalganj subdivisions, an anatomy of the peasants' distress. Deficiency in capital had kept most cultivable lands fallow and the piecemeal government benefits of agricultural loans at Rs. 5 per capita were hardly sufficient. The functional problems of implementing Bengal Agricultural Debtors Act surfaced as Mandal pointed out how formation of the Debt Settlement Boards in various villages to ameliorate the condition of debt-ridden peasantry had in fact aggravated their conditions as money lenders stopped doing their business.

[35] Ibid, March 11, 1938, p.154. The question with regard to requisite appointment of Scheduled Caste candidates had been raised by Jogendranath Mandal during the Question Hour session and to which Mullick had replied that he had not much knowledge of it.

[36] Dwaipayan Sen provides an exhaustive list of grievances posited by the Scheduled Caste MLAs regarding the under-representation of the SCs in the various departments of the Government. See Dwaipayan Sen, 'Representation, Education and Agrarian Reform: Jogendranath Mandal and the nature of Scheduled Caste politics, 1937-1943', *Modern Asian Studies*, First Review Article, February, 2013, p.14. The article has also been published in his book, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018

> Perhaps such an exigency was not anticipated by the makers of this Act. They ought to have made sufficient provision for affording cheap credit to the agriculturalists. On the contrary they have callously overlooked the matter. In the absence of any provision for supplying rural credit the Agricultural Debtors Act is being considered as a machinery of tyranny and repression not only by the creditors but the debtors also for whose benefit it was meant.[37]

The delays in establishment of agricultural banks were brought to notice, which would have been of particular assistance especially during times of agrarian crisis. And lastly, the inadequacies of the co-operative banks, which had otherwise emerged as the only suppliers of rural credit, were pointed out both in terms of their numbers as well as capital combined with the daily hiccups in their functioning. It was certainly an exhaustive presentation of the fundamental problems facing the peasantry despite governmental initiative. At the same time Mandal pointed out with efficacy, the critical lacunae in both the conception as well as practice of policy. On another occasion Mandal had raised the specific problem of the Bakarganj 'beel' areas (lowlying areas), which was his own constituency. As a result of continuous flooding of the Satla bil area due to lack of river embankments in the region, the cultivators had enormously suffered from repeated crop failures.[38] Ultimately the embankments were constructed as a result of Mandal's efforts and the people had hugely benefitted from it. Legislative struggle for economic demands pertaining to peasant needs was carried out simultaneously with relevant representational demands made by the Scheduled Caste leaders, contrary to the opinion of Sekhar Bandopadhyay that the leaders had focussed more on constitutional debates and institutional concessions than on peasant issues.[39]

The Calcutta Municipal (Amendment) Bill in fact saw a new high in the political alignment between Congress and the Independent Scheduled Caste Party. Introduced in the Assembly on February 27, 1939, the proposed amendment for separate electorates stimulated a legislative debate in which Birat Chandra Mandal, a Scheduled Caste member of the Ministerial group upheld the Bill calling it as 'something to the Scheduled Caste People', while Jogendranath Mandal and Rasiklal Biswas supported the Congress stand of joint electorate with reservation of seats for the Scheduled Castes. Mandal not only called it

[37] BLAP, March 15, 1939, p.354
[38] BLAP, March 6, 1939, pp. 136-137
[39] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p.172

antithetical to democratic principles but went so far as to declare: 'It might be that the Calcutta Corporation have done some wrong to the Scheduled Castes as well as to the Muhammadans but should one wrong be remedied by the commission of another wrong? Can we expect to see justice coming out of vengeance?'[40] The Calcutta Corporation election that followed in its wake in March 1940 in fact saw Mandal winning a Councillor's seat (reserved) as a result of active propaganda by Congress. However, the controversial exit of Subhas Chandra Bose from Congress after the Tripuri Session of March 1939 resulted in a severe distrust of the Congress, especially as Bose had been the main coagulant for a growing political camaraderie with the Scheduled Castes. Mandal increasingly grew sceptical of Congress intentions thereafter and gradually parted ways with the party.[41]

Bose's expulsion from the Congress meant arresting a palpable radicalisation of the party and its activities in Bengal. He had after all made strategic endeavours for a more grass-root politics through undertaking mass contact campaign and radical agrarian programmes, while encouraging inclusion of the released detenues, communist workers, the underground Anushilan and Jugantar societies in party activities and organising *krishak samities* meant ratifying a 'Left' objective. A climax was achieved with the Congress officially accepting abolition of Permanent Settlement as part of the Party Programme in 1939 as a cumulative outcome of intense agrarian mobilisation in the countryside.[42] In eastern Bengal, attempts were made to mobilise peasant agitation along socialist lines in the districts of Faridpur and Bakarganj,[43] and in Tippera and Mymensingh overtures to include the disgruntled leaders of the Krishak Praja Party and those among the Namasudra community had been achieved with some success.[44] This explains why the Scheduled Caste members in Bengal Legislature had readily allied with the Congress and their subsequent disappointment with the party when Subhas Chandra Bose was made to quit. From this time on leaders like Jogendranath Mandal increasingly drifted towards a more exclusive discourse of caste and 'autonomous' politics.

[40] BLAP, February 27, 1939, pp. 50-51

[41] Jogendranath Mandal's camaraderie with Subhas Chandra Bose went beyond the latter's resignation from Congress. When Bose established the Forward Bloc and carried out its campaign in Barisal, Mandal who had his political constituency there had even accompanied him for his campaigns in June 1940. See Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, vol. 1, pp.83-85

[42] Bengal Provincial Congress Committee's (BPCC) Annual Report, February 18, 1939, in *AICC Papers*, File No. P-24 (Part- II)/1938-39

[43] Fortnightly Report for first half month of April 1938, GI, Home (Pol), File no. 18/4/1938 (Pol)

[44] Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, pp. 206-207

Meanwhile, a political realignment occurred with Fazlul Huq's new alliance with Shyama Prasad Mukherjee to form the Progressive Coalition Party in December 1941, popularly called the *Shyama-Huq* ministry. While the Muslim League considered it treachery by Fazlul Huq, the Namasudras were not too happy as the new cabinet had included only one Scheduled Caste minister, Upendranath Barman from the Rajbanshi caste. However, with the outbreak of the Quit India Movement in August 1942, the ministry fell into doldrums and resignation of Shyama Prasad Mukherjee upon his disagreement with the government's repressive policies created an impasse which led to the Governor's rule in the state under the special provision of Article 93. When finally Nazimuddin of Muslim League was asked to form government on April 13, 1943, his ministry despite being derided by the nationalist press as 'a custodian of European vested interest', claimed to include three Scheduled Caste members in its cabinet with two from the Namasudra caste, Jogendranath Mandal as the Minister in charge of Co-operative Credit and Rural Indebtedness and Pulin Behari Mullick in charge of Publicity department.

As Secretary of the Independent Scheduled Caste Party, Mandal had criticised the second Huq ministry for its alleged inability to implement the Communal Ratio Rule in so far as appointment of the Scheduled Castes to official posts as per their quota was concerned and for sanctioning a reduced grant of Rs. 2 lakh against an initial allotment of a recurring grant of Rs. 5 lakh for education of the Scheduled Castes.[45] With all earlier fidelities thus defaulting, whether it was the Krishak Praja Party or the Congress, a tactical consensus emerged amongst the 'disaffected' Scheduled Caste MLAs to negotiate with any party or group which would concede to their demands. This meeting held in Calcutta after the dissolution of the second Huq ministry included Rasik Lal Biswas of Jessore and Monmohan Das of Mymensingh. These demands were:

1. Appointment of three ministers from among the Scheduled Castes;
2. A recurring grant of Rs. 5 lakh for education of the Scheduled Castes and;
3. Proper implementation of communal ratio in appointment of Scheduled Caste candidates to government posts including senior posts as per their allotted quota.[46]

[45]Mayasuki Usuda, 'Pushed Towards the Partition: Jogendranath Mandal and the Constrained Namasudra Movement', in H. Kotani (ed.) *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*, Manohar: New Delhi, 1997, p.246
[46]Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath,* vol. 1, p.102

Upon Nazimuddin's acceptance of these demands, 21 independent Scheduled Caste MLAs of the Bengal Legislative Assembly affirmed their support to the Nazimuddin ministry.[47] This was also the time when a group of Scheduled Caste leaders led by Jogendranath Mandal had joined B.R. Ambedkar's All India Scheduled Castes Federation which was inaugurated in Nagpur in July 1942. The party meant to represent exclusive interests of the Scheduled Caste community, across the various Indian states, was symbolical of an ultimate resort to an 'autonomous' political voyage for the latter. According to Gail Omvedt, Ambedkar's establishment of the Scheduled Caste Federation 'was a step backwards' from his 1930s radicalism as its 'very formation meant giving up the effort to form a broad radical party of Dalit and caste Hindu workers and peasants for the different goal of uniting Dalits on an all-India level.' From a rather revolutionary vision of social transformation built around a class-caste alliance, Ambedkar had ultimately resorted to forming a party exclusively for the Scheduled Castes which would operate 'as a special interest group within a statist-capitalist democratic structure'.[48]

Incidentally the new genre of Scheduled Caste politics became more focussed on making demands of representation. In Bengal, the 'specific' demands tabled by the Scheduled Caste leaders for negotiation with the Muslim League had been more exclusively focussed on seeking representation, whether in the legislature or government services or seeking educational security. The much broader peasant concerns seemed to have disappeared from the list of political bargains. Ambedkar's call for an autonomous political movement had certainly motivated a group of Scheduled Caste representatives in Bengal who had become increasingly cynical of nationalist politics. Having navigated through divergent political currents the emergence of an exclusive platform certainly gave them a promising anchorage but in the loop of political choices to be made, the broader concerns of an otherwise largely peasant community were often overlooked.

[47] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, April 20, 1943
[48] Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1986, pp. 217-218

Caste aspirations vis-à-vis communal mobilisation

An obvious outcome of regional politics becoming increasingly identity-based was a growth in communalization of the society. Ironical as it was, the political rise of the traditionally subordinated as well as the marginalized sections in Bengal which had resulted in a substantial inversion of the older configurations of power had simultaneously provoked communal tension across various social classes. To begin with, formation of a Krishak Praja Party and Muslim League government after the elections of 1937 had intrinsically affected the communal equation of the state given that the communal divide had largely corresponded to the class/ status divisions. Hence, from the very beginning, there had been communal confrontations in the countryside where the anti-zamindar and anti-mahajan movements had become synonymous with being anti-Hindu. According to Taj ul-Islam Hashmi, the several pro-peasant legislations initiated by the newly formed government like the Bengal Tenancy Amendment Act of 1938, the Bengal Agricultural Debtor's Act and the Moneylender's Act had in fact resulted in fuelling the 'millenarian aspirations' of 'a certain section of the peasantry' which had resorted to non-payment of rents and debts, such as in parts of Tippera, Mymensingh and Rajshahi. Not only that, much of the pre-election propaganda had been on communal lines, by not only the Muslim League, but even the economically pledged Krishak Praja Party of Fazlul Huq, appealing to Islamic principles and involving the services of the Muslim *ulama*.[49] Hence it is not surprising that Fazlul Huq formed a political alliance with the Muslim League post-elections when negotiations for a governmental alliance with Congress failed.[50]

Meanwhile, Congress' failure to capture Muslim seats in the elections raised a pragmatic concern and led the party to seriously contemplate an effective mass contact programme with

[49] See Taj ul- Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia*, p.180-188.

[50] Notwithstanding the constant political vacillations of Fazlul Huq between Congress and Muslim League and even forming a coalition government with Shyama Prasad Mukherjee in 1941, the fact remains that he had made some extremely communal statements after coming to power in 1937. At the Calcutta session of Muslim League held in April 1938, he characterised the position of the Muslims as critical. In fact expressing his scepticism towards the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha he said that the Muslims were faced with the Congress on one side 'with all its might, organisation and resources, determined to crush and subdue the Muslims' and the Hindu Mahasabha on the other 'devoting its energies to the frustration of Muslim hopes and the suppression of the legitimate right and press of the Muslim India'. Stimulating the Muslim crowd he further said that 'The time has come for us to review what steps the Muslims have taken so far to counteract these sinister forces which aim at the complete enslavement of the Muslim population of India'. *Hindusthan Standard,* April 10, 1938 in *AICC Papers*, 1st Instalment, File No. G-32/1938

the Muslims in Bengal. In a series of personal exchanges between Jawaharlal Nehru and the Bose brothers, possible strategies of drawing in Muslim masses were discussed in detail. "The most important problem before Bengal is how to rally the Muslim masses under the banner of the Congress. This is possible only by taking in hand the land-problem and undertaking the organisation of the peasantry. How is this to [be] done? By organising the peasantry in a separate organisation as, for instance the Trade Union Congress? Or by starting Congress Kisan Sabhas as an integral part of the Congress, somewhat like the Congress Socialist Party? This work will imply our alienating the landlords which, to me appears inevitable."[51] This letter written by Subhas Chandra Bose to Nehru in April 1937 quite aptly pointed out the party's immediate need and line of action, at the same time highlighting the risks involved in losing the support of the zamindars. But subsequent political blunders, whether it was opposing the Tenancy Amendment Bill in the Legislature[52] or the lack of an effective Muslim Mass Contact Campaign[53], followed by Bose's exit from the Congress and the take-over by the conservative faction led by Dr. B.C. Roy from the early 1940s, had not only arrested any further pursuit of a radical agrarian agenda but also saw an aggravation of the communal problem in the state.

This was also the time which saw a strategic coherence of Hindu revivalist activities by the Hindu Mahasabha and other affiliated Hindu organisations. While the Communal Award of 1932 was deeply resented and opposed by the upper caste Hindu *bhadralok*, the outcome of subsequent provincial elections not only ratified their fears but served as an eye opener. For the insecure Hindu bhadralok it became imperative to secure Hindu unity in order to counter the Muslims on one hand and on the other, to reach out to the estranged sections to increase

[51] Letter dated 11th April 1937, *AICC Papers*, 1st Instalment, P-5 (part II)/1937

[52] Although Congress had opposed the Bill on grounds that it failed to benefit the lower rungs of the peasantry, its ultimate abstain from voting in its favour in the Legislature created an impression that the party was actually pro-landlord, who had also opposed the Bill for obvious reasons. It instantly fanned rumours such as 'the leader of the Congress party in the Assembly is in league with the Zemindar group in the Ministry and in the Assembly.' This had certainly instigated the communal situation in the state where most of the peasants were Muslims and the landlords, Hindus. It had also made the position of the Muslim Congress workers 'very precarious', who urged the party 'to support the right of the tenants'. Letter from the Muslim Congress Members, Tippera district, dated 8th October 1937, *AICC Papers*, 2nd Instalment, P-5 (I)/1937

[53] Muslim Mass Contact Campaign was undertaken at a pan-Indian level by the All India Congress Committee after the party had failed poorly in the Muslim constituencies, in the elections of 1937. It was essentially a brain-child of Nehru as 'the need for greater contacts with Muslim', set out in March 1937 and approved in the October session of the Congress. Ashrafuddin Chowdhury in Bengal wanted to know whether the programme would be pursued with seriousness or would remain 'a mere paper propaganda'. Despite being launched with much enthusiasm, the movement suffered major lacunae and was withdrawn within two years' time. For a detailed discussion on the campaign see Mushirul Hasan, 'The Muslim Mass Contacts Campaign: Analysis of a Strategy of Political Mobilization' in M.Hasan (ed.), *India's Partition*

their numbers. Hence inclusive drives specifically targeting the backward communities such as the tribals and the Scheduled Castes in particular were concertedly undertaken. The Bharat Sevashram Sangha founded by Pranabananda addressed the Hindu '*sangathanist*' venture socially and culturally through undertaking various measures to remove untouchability and facilitated interaction and integration across the divergent sections of Hindus through construction of the *Hindu Milan Mandirs*. By 1939, 38 Milan Mandirs had been established in Pabna, 52 in Noakhali, 25 in Chittagong, 20 in Tipperah, 9 in Rajshahi, 3 in Barisal, 3 in Faridpur, 1 each in Rangpur, Khulna, Howrah, Nadia and 8 in Maldah.[54] Apart from this *Rakshi Dals* or groups of militant volunteers were formed as a show of physical strength and prowess. Often such groups were constituted of lower castes such as Namasudras, Poundra Kshatriyas and Bagdis in eastern, western and southern Bengal and Rajbanshis in northern Bengal, traditionally known for their physical strength. Politically, the project was undertaken in a more focussed way by the Hindu Mahasabha after Vinayak Damodar Savarkar had taken over its reins in the late 1930s, and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee emerged as the vanguard of the mission in Bengal.[55] Scholars have by and large identified a surging trend of communalization of caste identities during this period as a result of schematic interventions made by the Hindu organisations.[56] The rural scenario however, was way more complex.

Political rise of the Muslim 'praja' was indeed symbolical of a perceived sense of power and agency for those who had been dominated for long. In Bengal since this class division of the dominant and the subservient had largely coincided with the religious composition of the state's demography, it led to significant escalation of riots and disturbances in the east Bengal

[54] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, November 5, 1939

[55] One of the resolutions adopted at the Calcutta session of the All India Hindu Mahasabha held in December 1939 had been to make a provision for 'the protection of the special rights and privileges of the Hindu Scheduled Classes and Depressed classes etc. in guaranteeing their special rights of representation in the legislature for a definite period of time', should the communal award be repealed. This was certainly a 'turn around' from an earlier intransigent position held in particular by the Hindu *bhadralok* class in Bengal towards sharing power with low caste Hindus. List of resolutions passed in the All India Hindu Mahasabha Conference, Calcutta, December 28-30, 1939 in File No. PH-510/44 (1944), Reports on Bharat Sevasram Sangha, Office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Special Branch, Calcutta Police Museum, Kolkata,

[56] Sekhar Bandopadhayay tends to exclusively focus on the Hindu communal activities in influencing and mobilising the Namasudra peasants against their Muslim neighbours. See Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity* and; *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, Sage Publications: New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London, 2004. Also, 'Mobilizing for a Hindu Homeland: Dalits, Hindu Nationalism and Partition of Bengal (1947), in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato (eds.), *The Unfinished Agenda: nation-Building in South Asia*, Manohar: New Delhi, 2001. For a more recent discussion see Sarbani Bandopadhyay, 'Another History: Bhadralok responses to Dalit political assertion in colonial Bengal' in Uday Chandra et al (eds.), *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, Routledge: Oxon and New York, 2016

country side. However this class-cum-community binary of the state also included a third side, the low caste Hindus, who shared common class concerns with the Muslims owing to their occupational similarity and, a common religious identity with the Hindus though regarded low in social hierarchy. Historically, both the Namasudra and Muslim peasants had been equally despised and exploited by the upper caste Hindu zamindars. There had been cases of occasional class unity between the Namasudra and Muslim bargadars of Narail in 1923 and Jessore in 1928 against the Hindu zamindars.[57] But, with the perceived Muslim 'victory' in 1937 the earlier precedents of class camaraderie more often gave way to communal animosity in which the Muslims confronted the Namasudra peasants. Also, unlike earlier cases these riots were provoked and supported by 'external' factors and took particular cognizance of the communal feelings which had come to acquire intrinsic political value.

As early as in 1937, there was a clash between the two communities in Ramnagar of Pabna district[58] when the Hindu jotedar of the village had let out his lands to the Namasudra instead of the Muslim bargadars as the latter had refused to give one-half of the yield to the jotedar. This subsequently led to increased tension with active involvement of some local leaders of the Krishak Praja Party and the local *ulama*. By June temples had been desecrated in the neighbouring villages. But the Muslim leaders of the district denied any Muslim involvement in the act and in fact asserted that the local Hindus under the leadership of the Hindu Mahasabha have desecrated their own temples in order to alienate the Hindu landlords from their Muslim tenants. Circumstantial evidence however suggested involvement of local Muslim League leaders in the conflict between the Muslim bargadars and the Hindu jotedars of the district.[59] The following year saw another bout of disturbance between the Namasudra and Muslim peasants, over a dispute regarding land boundary in Kulia of the Magura subdivision of Jessore.[60] It led to a riotous situation which killed a Muslim villager and was

[57] The Namasudra and Muslim sharecroppers had under oppressive circumstances 'gone on strike' against the upper caste Hindu zamindars, till a decent bargain of gains would be achieved. And often these general strikes which would begin around legitimate economic demands would assume a wider character of a social protest by the *Ajlaf* (inferior rank) Muslim and Namasudra sharecroppers, which 'provided a very different kind of alternative to the caste upliftment moves by Gandhians and Hindu organizations which ignored the problems of class relations that structured the existence of the untouchables.' See Sumit Sarkar, 'The conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Cooperation, 1905-22' in Ranajit Guha (ed.) *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, OUP: Delhi, 1984, pp. 39-40

[58] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, April 17, 1937

[59] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, December 16, 1937. It is important to note in this context that many of the KPP leaders had been defecting to the Muslim league. Taj ul- Islam Hashmi in fact points out that by 1938 most of the KPP MLAs had joined the League. See Taj ul-Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia*, p.208

[60] Fortnightly Report for first half month of May 1938, GI, Home (Pol), File no. 18/5/1938

ultimately brought under control only when local police intervened. But mutual distrust and unease continued to pervade between the two communities for a long time to come. The situation had been considerably provoked by an event causing deliberate disruption of the Jessore Krishak Samiti meeting by the Muslim League supporters, which was held in Keshabpur on 28th and 29th April and hugely attended by the Hindus.

The Dacca riot of 1941 and the simultaneous outbreak of violence in Khulna between mid-March and April were occasions of communal aggrandisement which also affected and found Namasudras and Muslims confronting each other. In a generic way the riots were triggered by the communally charged atmosphere in the wake of the census operations of 1941 and declaration of Pakistan demand by the Muslim League in its Lahore resolution of 1940. At the Madura conference of the Hindu Mahasabha held in December 1940, Savarkar in his presidential speech had given a provocative call 'that the Hindus would separately organise themselves, giving up all hope of unity with Muslims.'[61] This was followed up with active touring of several districts by the Mahasabha workers, which was believed to have 'invariably accentuated communal feeling'. As testified by a confidential government report in February, 1941, 'Only the gravest consequences can be expected to result from an extended agitation inspired by a body which could and would appeal to communal fanaticism and would be unrestricted by any professed adherence to principles of non-violence'.[62] The Muslim League also appealed for unity amongst the Muslims. At a hugely attended meeting of the Muslim League in Khulna held on 16th February 1941, the speakers, Maulana Azizur Rahman Islamabadi of Chittagong and Maulvi Shamsuddin Ahmed emphasized on the necessity to unite under the League's banner. Thus, vigorous propaganda by both sides, selling either the idea of Pakistan or that of an indivisible 'Akhand Hindusthan' to respective audience, had invariably served as catalyst for an eventual outbreak of a riot.[63]

The riot originated in Dacca town in March, 1941 during the traditional Hindu festival of *holi,* as a culmination of a prolonged friction between the Hindu community of Sankhari Bazaar and the Muslims in Katla Bazaar. In no time what began as minor scuffles inflated to such proportion that it not only devastated the town but had also engulfed the neighbouring villages of Narsingdi, Raipur and Shibpur areas of Narayanganj division. These villages

[61] FCR on the Political Situation in Bengal for the first half of January, 1941, GB, (Home Pol. Dept.)
[62] FCR for the second half of February, 1941, GB, (Home Pol. Dept.), File No. 13/41
[63] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, May 20, 1942, stating the Enquiry Committee Report of the Dacca Riot of 1941

reported of mass scale conversion of Namasudra inhabitants to Islam by the local *maulvi* and *ulama*. To quote a report from a village named, Chasiridia under the Shibpur police station:

> This village which is near Noadia is inhabited by a large number of Namasudras and Moslems also. On 4.4.41 the following Namasudras named Nanda, Kamidu, Durgacharan, Chanmohan, Rajani Mohan, Giris, Nishikanta, Ushair, Khoshal, Mohesh, Umesh, Nabin, Hari Charan whom we met were asked by the Moslems to become [Muslims] immediately else these Moslems said that the houses of Namasudras will be burnt. On declining their houses were burnt. On agreeing to become Moslems under very serious threatening there was no more burning of houses. Maulvis tore Tulsi mala, put on Tupia and lungis and compelled over 50 Namasudras to say names along with other 100 Moslems at Beltala Itga. They told us they lodged E[j]ahar a[nd] the Maulvi of Vitipara also took part but name was not available.[64]

Even the women were not spared, their *shankhas*[65] were broken by the Muslim women and all the necessary rituals of conversion duly performed. There were cases of forced marriages also. Similar cases were reported from other villages of the region. In Khulna simultaneously, the communal riot in Mollarhat police station area was catapulted by a dispute between a Namasudra and a Muslim which immediately led to mobilisation of huge crowd on either side. The Namasudra regions of Bhola in Bakarganj and Narail sub-division of Jessore had also in effect become considerably explosive in this general atmosphere of communal unrest.[66]

The census operation of 1941 in fact had significantly provoked communal mobilisation, for it was an opportunity for both the Hindu and the Muslim sides to ensure that their strengths showed a favourable turn, the Hindus hoping thereby to upset the Communal Award and the Muslims determined to uphold it.[67] Both the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League therefore engaged in propaganda warfare to defend and even expand their communal ratio. While official enumerations were in process there were in fact allegations from both the sides

[64] Memo No. R/14875 / PM 734/41 dated 22.4.41 in File No: PM-734/41, Reports on Communal Riots in Dacca, Khulna and other districts (1941), Office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Special Branch,
[65] An ornament made from conch shell worn by Hindu women after their marriage and held highly sacred.
[66] FCR on Political Situation in Bengal during first half of April, 1941, GB (Home Pol.)
[67] Confidential report, Governor's Secretariat, Central Intelligence Officer's Note to Governor on Political developments in Bengal since 1935 Govt. of India Act, March 1944, IOR: R/3/2/55

for tampering of data and mal-practices in recordings.[68] The Hindu Mahasabha had been particularly apprehensive of the fact that the classification in the new census was to be on the basis of 'community' and not religion, which it considered as a major 'departure' from the older practice, and a cause of 'great injustice' towards the Hindus. It would allow the tribes and the Scheduled Castes the choice to register themselves as separate communities and result in a substantial loss of numerical strength for the Hindu community as a whole, while at the same time increase the communal ratio of the Muslims in all provinces and most notably in Bengal.[69] Hence strategic measures were undertaken with utmost urgency, with properly laid out plans being handed down to every provincial and local Hindu Sabha in order to ensure enumeration of 'all the Hindus'.[70]

Notwithstanding such tactical drives towards 'inclusion' which did have its desired impact, some of the responses of the targeted audience had been quite divergent. Members of the Scheduled Caste community of Serajganj in Rajshahi had in a meeting decided to bargain for two seats for the SCs in the Serajganj Municipality in lieu of getting themselves enumerated as Hindus.[71] The census had after all provided them with an opportunity to negotiate their terms of being called a Hindu. There were also instances of anxiety and disapproval expressed by many Scheduled Caste associations against the conduct of the census affairs. Thus, the local Scheduled Caste Association of Burdwan had expressed apprehension over their 'community becoming sadly reduced in numbers' as a result of the manner of census

[68] Any effective neutrality towards conducting the census operations was 'hampered' by communal feeling, largely as a result of the activities by both the Hindu and the Muslim parties. Each community had become suspicious of the other and they were not entirely baseless. In Noakhali some enumerators were found to be careless in their work and were suspected of making deliberate mistakes. Prosecution had been sanctioned in two cases in the district and a similar prosecution filed against a Hindu Union Board clerk at Algichar in Chandpur sub-division. In Chittagong, the Muslim League made representations to the District Officer in which they expressed 'their fears of wrong entries being made in the census.' In Tippera, the District Officer reported that the Muslims were agitating against a suspected inflation of census figures made by the Hindu groups, which could induce them to do the same. FCR for Chittagong Division for the period ending 23.2.41, Part II, GB, Home (Pol), File No. 13/41

[69] Census of India, 1941, *All India Hindu Mahasabha Papers* (*AIHM*), File No. C-31/1941, NMML

[70] *The Hindu Outlook*, December 7, 1940, ibid. Of particular concern were some of the aboriginal tribal communities who had not been registered as Hindus in the previous census, which the Mahasabha alleged was partially owing to the ignorance of such groups and partially a result of missionary intrigue. Hence, the organisation hardly kept any stone unturned just to ensure that the aboriginal groups got themselves enumerated as Hindus. It may be pertinent to highlight here the extent to which this project was undertaken. The local Hindu Sabhas were instructed to send propagandists, *Kathakars*, *Puaniks*, in the tribal regions 'to re-emphasise or awaken the Pan Hindu consciousness amongst them and get themselves pledged that they should insist on being registered as Hindus' when the Census authorities visit them. Not only that, since the aboriginals were ignorant and illiterate, the respective District Hindu Sabhas were instructed to depute 'able and influential leaders' with some volunteers to accompany the Governmental Census enumerators on the day of the Census to 'see to it that every man and woman amongst these tribes is registered as a Hindu'.

[71] FCR for Rajshahi Division for the second half of February, 1941, GB, Home (Pol), File No. 13/41

operations,[72] while the massively attended Scheduled Caste Conference held at Jhalakati in Dacca on 19 and 20 April said that 'the community had been cheated at the census by Hindu enumerators who wrote "Hindu" instead of "Namasudra" in column 3 of the slips'.[73] Discrepancies in census enumerations were also vociferously highlighted by Scheduled Caste leaders like Mukunda Behari Mullick, Rasik Lal Biswas and Jogendranath Mandal at a later date, both in Assembly sessions as well as outside.[74]

However, increased communal tension particularly in the aftermath of the Dacca riot invariably made the Hindu communal organisations more popular. The Hindus in general were more than willing to contribute to the relief efforts of the Hindu Mahasabha towards rehabilitation of riot victims than those undertaken by the Congress as the latter being a secular organisation could have also aided Muslims.[75] Memories of violence were not meant to be erased as Shyama Prasad Mukherjee appealed to all Hindus, across the social ladder to unite for a resurrection and prepare for self-defence taking lessons from the Narayanganj riot.[76] After the riot, the Hindu organisations had become considerably active in the Namasudra dominant villages of Dacca which had been pillaged by Muslim marauders. Milan Mandirs were established by the Bharat Sevasram Sangha in the villages of Raipur, Sreerampur and Narsingdi in a bid to reach out to the low caste victims as well as fortify these bastions for future action.[77] It is important to point out that both Namasudra and Muslim peasants had been highly aspirational in coveting improved social status through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and given that both had belonged to the same rural milieu, it inevitably made them rivals. Hence, occasions of tactical bonding based on common class ties had alternated with violent engagements in the recent past as has already been discussed, thereby calling for a rather complex understanding of the relations between the two rural communities. Politicisation of the rural areas followed by a subsequent subversion of the

[72] FCR for Burdwan Division for the period ending 11. 3.41, Part II, GB, Home (Pol), File No. 13/41
[73] FCR for Dacca Division for the first half of May, GB Home (Pol), File No. 13/41
[74] Dwaipayan Sen, 'Representation, Education and Agrarian Reform', pp. 32-34
[75] At the Calcutta Corporation, the Hindu employees almost boycotted making contributions for the Congress Relief Fund that wDere being collected for the riot victims. And even if they did, the contributors made sure that the money was spent for the Hindu sufferers only. 'Bengal Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha', dated 7.4.41in File No. PM-734/41, Communal Riots in Dacca, Khulna and other districts (1941), Office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Special Branch.
[76] Statement by Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, Working President, All India Hindu Mahasabha in File No. PM-734/41, Communal Riots in Dacca, Khulna and other districts (1941) II, Office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Special Branch.
[77] File No. PH-510/44 (1944), Reports on Bharat Sevasram Sangha, Office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Special Branch.

traditional power structure had certainly emboldened both communities but at the same time hardened their divergences even more with opportune communalisation from 'outside'. This trend reached a crest with the world war developments in Bengal and the famine of 1943.

Hasty preparations for the Second World War on the eastern front and the Bengal Famine had a twin impact, which had not only resulted in devastating the peasant population of eastern Bengal but also provided a threshold to mass based communal politics. It also coincided with a crisis in the Bengal ministry when Fazlul Huq was coerced to resign and Nazimuddin was asked to form the government on April 13, 1943 by the Governor, John Herbert, which marked the official ascendancy of Muslim League in Bengal. The new cabinet however, was unprecedentedly representative of the Scheduled Castes, including two ministers from the Namasudra caste. And yet, forces at the ground predicated a different turn of events when the poorer sections of the peasant population in East Bengal hugely constituted from the Namasudra community became emaciated as a result of a brutal war policy and the resultant famine conditions.

War scare loomed large over eastern India from late 1941 when the Japanese defeated the British forces in the East and posed a direct threat to British possessions in eastern India, particularly Bengal. This stepped up war preparations in Bengal and with the fall of Burma in March 1942, the imperial state panicked and resorted to a policy of 'destruction' and 'denial', to meet an immediate necessity of preventing all access to the Japanese. The idea was to destroy possible amenities like ports, wireless and telegraph systems which could be used by the enemy as well as denying the latter any basic subsistence of food and transport. The government's 'denial policy' however meant serious implications for the local population as well, for it not only meant removal of paddy and rice but also removal and destruction of the country boats which carried it. The economy of East Bengal had quintessentially thrived on a vast network of waterways and river systems that criss-crossed its hinterland and trading via the country boats was not only an intrinsic part of the food distribution system but also the most common and often the only form of communication between various villages and towns.[78] The denial of boats therefore directly upset the entire economic system of those areas. Leonard George Pinnell, who was in charge of executing the denial policy and later also the Director of Civil Supplies, noted a removal of 46,146 boats from the 'denial areas' of

[78] Memorandum of Justice H.B.L. Braund, on events from March 1943 to the end of 1943 in relation to the Food Situation in Bengal, Calcutta, 1944 in *Nanavati Papers*, File No. 5, NAI, pp.6-7

Chandpur-Barisal-Khulna-Basirhat-Diamond Harbour-Kharagpur; while only 2,292 boats had been officially retained; 4,513 boats provided temporary permits and 20,417 were untraceable.[79] Confiscation of these boats could barely be compensated and most of them had been rendered unserviceable for lack of use[80] but above all it had 'throttled down trade' in the southern areas, in particular the movement of paddy and food grains from the surplus areas of Bakarganj, Khulna and 24 Parganas (Sunderbans) to the markets up north and west.[81] While it adversely affected the local inhabitants in general, the impact was more deeply felt by the poorer sections such as the agricultural labourers, paddy huskers and the fisherman who invariably belonged to the lower caste and Muslim communities. Namasudras, mostly residing in these riverine tracts of eastern Bengal had suffered tremendously.

As if the repercussions of 'denial' were not enough the local people also had to succumb to mass scale evacuations and atrocities by the military.[82] An unofficial estimate of around 1.5 lakh people were coerced to evacuate their homes from the districts of Noakhali, Chittagong, Tippera, Jessore and Khulna, upon a very short notice and with piecemeal arrangements from the government.[83] These areas largely composed of poor cultivators were worst hit as a result of an ill-planned evacuation scheme as the families' judiciously stocked up paddy, rice, jute and other necessities had to be left behind for want of fund and proper conveyance.[84] The resultant effect of such massive destruction of existing resources was further compounded with an actual crop failure occurring in 1942-43 in the aftermath of a cyclone in the coastal regions of Bengal and Orissa and a serious crop disease, which slashed Bengal's crop output

[79] General history and survey of the Dept. of Civil supplies, etc., collected as evidence to the Famine Relief Enquiry commission, *Leonard George Pinnell Papers*, IOL: MSS/ D/911/8, p.144.

[80] In most cases, even if substantial compensation was provided for the confiscated boats, it mostly went to the owners, while the others who were dependent on them for their livelihood received nothing for their deprivation. It directly affected the *Jele* or the community of fishermen, particularly the deep sea fishers of Chittagong. It was difficult to seek alternative employment for them and even when fishing was restored, they couldn't be sure if the boats, unused for long, would be fit to put to sea. See L.G. Pinnell's deposition to the Famine Inquiry Commission, *Nanavati Papers*, Vol. II, pp.543-544

[81] Ibid, p.543. Also see, *Memoirs of F.O. Bell,* as District Magistrate and Collector of Bakarganj, IOR: MSS EUR F180/8, p.71. Bell says that in the riverine district of Bakarganj, the boats were the lifeline of the local community for their daily sustenance. Withdrawal of these boats therefore had a devastating impact, particularly on the poorer classes. Thousands of boats were received at Palang, north of the Bakarganj boundary in Faridpur. Later it was asserted that this 'denial of boats', had led to famine in this region in the subsequent year.

[82] Statements of the victims dated April 25, 1942, Feni, Noakhali, pp. 6-14, *AICC Papers* (1st instalment), File no. G-31 (Part II)/1942

[83] Prafulla Chandra Ghosh provides an anatomy of estimated evacuation from various parts of eastern Bengal: Noakhali- 75,000, of which 70,000 were from the Feni Sub-Division; Chittagong- 25,000; Tippera- 20,000; Jessore- 10,000; Diamond Harbour- 10,000; Behala- 5,000 and; Khulna- 4,000. Letter to Jawaharlal Nehru on Compulsory Evacuation in Bengal, dated 25.04.1942, ibid, pp. 15-17

[84] Secretary of Jessore District Congress Committee to the General Secretary, AICC, Allahabad, letter dated 27.4.1942, pp. 65-72, *AICC Papers* (1st Instalment), File No. G-31 (Part-I)/1942

by about two million tons than its normal production. This deficit could not be compensated with import of rice from Burma, which had otherwise been a usual practice, due to Japanese occupation. Nevertheless, the imperial concerns of feeding the 'priority classes' comprising the military and the industries engaged in the war effort were to be compromised under no circumstances. And since the industries producing for the army were mostly based in Calcutta, a procurement policy was tactically adopted to navigate all available resources from the *mofussils* to the Calcutta metropolis, thereby converting the erstwhile surplus districts into deficit ones. As much as 40,000 tons of rice had been removed from the 'denial' areas and although the quantity wasn't huge in comparison to the total production, it certainly caused insecurity in public minds which prompted speculation and large-scale hoarding of essential items.[85] Inevitably it culminated in generic shortages and an upward spiralling of prices of basic commodities.

A change of hands in Bengal government in the midst of such crucial times from Fazlul Huq to Nazimuddin in April 1943 made matters worse. While it was an important victory for the Muslim League but the new ministry had assumed power amidst extreme food scarcity. H.S. Suhrawardy who became Minister of Civil Supplies gave statement in a press conference held on May 8, 1943 that Bengal had sufficient supplies of food grains and that alleged shortages were due to a problem of mass hoarding and black marketing and 'if only the hoards in Bengal could be made mobile, the situation could be eased.'[86] The new government therefore embarked upon a dual policy of first, abolishing the zonal barriers which impeded distribution of supplies and also perpetuated a system of permits liable to abuse. This was intended to facilitate a more flexible movement of grains from the surplus to the deficit areas, thereby arresting the rise in prices. And second, enunciation of a clear cut policy against hoarding and black marketing to prevent further speculation in prices.[87] The policy unfortunately proved to be a short-sighted one, which further worsened the situation particularly for the mofussil areas and the rural poor. The anti-hoarding drive and the free-trade policy could neither ensure sufficiency nor control inflation. According to Manilal Nanavati of the Famine Inquiry Commission, 'a clear conflict of interest arose early in 1943 between Calcutta, where the maintenance of supplies was a primary problem, and the poorer

[85] B.R. Sen, Director General of Food, Government of India, in his deposition to the Famine Inquiry Commission, *Nanavati Papers*, Vol. II p.442
[86] Bimal Chandra Sinha and Haricharan Ghosh, June 1, Food Problem in Bengal, June 1, 1943 in *Shyama Prasad Mookerjee Papers*, Sub File No. 112, Instalment II-IV, Bengal Famine, NMML
[87] BLAP, July 5, 1943, p.81

classes in the rural areas whose lives depended on the availability of supplies at reasonable prices. Consciously or unconsciously, the Bengal Government allowed the needs of the latter to be outweighed by the former.'[88]

What followed thereafter was an unbridled spate of rural pauperisation and de-peasantisation. Famine conditions had accelerated 'transfer of lands' in order to deal with increased indebtedness and desperation. Most of these lands were sold as a last resort to procure money for rice and basic sustenance. While landless labourers were worst affected, the small peasant economies were shattered. Between April 1943 and April 1944, 9.2 lakh families had sold their paddy holdings, of which 2.6 lakh families sold their holdings. Majority of these families held below 2 acres of land. 6.7 lakh families mortgaged their possessions partially, of which 1.3 lakhs had to ultimately sell part of their holdings. A further 5.6 lakh families sold a part of their land-holdings.[89] At the end of 1944 an estimated 40 per cent of the rural population had become landless, including sharecroppers. Those with less than 2 acres of land had no choice but to sell their entire land since they were so small. The middle or richer peasants could still retain some holdings but on the whole there was deterioration of economic standards in the countryside. Since the Scheduled Castes were amongst the worst sufferers of the famine, their concerns were tabled in the Legislative Assembly by some of their representatives. Monmohan Das, an MLA from the Rajbanshi community, bitterly criticized the Nazimuddin ministry for its anti-hoarding drive, which he said, 'was directed not towards the capitalist hoarders of Calcutta but against the poor agriculturalists in rural areas...' With specific reference to the Scheduled Castes he said that they 'are the poorest section and they are the most suffering section… If any section is to die for want of food, if any section goes without food, it is the Scheduled Castes, and it is the first and foremost duty of the Scheduled Castes to co-operate in solving the food problem.'[90] Ironically there were three Scheduled Caste ministers in the Bengal cabinet of that time, with Jogendranath Mandal in charge of Co-operative Credit and Rural Indebtedness Department, Pulin Behari Mullick in charge of Publicity Department, both from the Namasudra caste and Premhari Barma as Minister of Forests and Excise Department. Mukunda Behari Mullick in fact defended the government stating that it would be both unjust and erroneous to hold the present ministry

[88] Famine Inquiry Commission, File no.6, *Nanavati Papers*, p.1
[89] P.C. Mahalanobis, R.K. Mukerjea and A.Ghosh, 'A Sample Survey of After-Effects of the Bengal Famine of 1943', *Sankhya: The Indian Journal of Statistics*, 7,4 (July 1946) in Adrienne Cooper, Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles in Bengal, 1930-1950, K.P. Bagchi & Company: Calcutta, 1988, p.55
[90] BLAP, July 13, 1943, pp.325-327

wholly responsible for all the misfortunes that had happened in the province and instead blamed it on some of the political and religiously motivated organisations which were conniving against government efforts for amassing their own advantage.[91] While Mullick may have a justifiable point along with other Scheduled Caste representatives who continued their alliance with the Muslim League but equally true was the fact that people from their own community had been worst hit by the famine and despite being part of the cabinet there was hardly any proactive initiative or redressal programme undertaken. In fact as already pointed out in the last section, much of the earlier pro-peasant concerns seemed to have taken a back-foot in preference of making more representational demands. This eventual disconnect that the leadership developed with the every-day needs of a predominantly rural community ultimately left a lasting impact.

Meanwhile, the Hindu Mahasabha played a pivotal role in not only criticising the Muslim League ministry in Bengal but also strengthened its base through undertaking constructive famine relief work. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee made serious allegations against the government's incompetence, corruption and unalloyed loyalty for the colonial mandate, both within the Legislative Assembly as well as outside. Not only that, the Mahasabha also engaged in significant counter-propaganda alleging that the Muslim League pursued a sinister communal agenda in the garb of its selective famine relief work. The food drive initiated by the government was looked upon with suspicion as merely a pretext to strengthen the Muslim League, which would make use of the opportunity to set up its committees in the villages. The Hindus were asked to maintain caution lest the League exploit the situation to its vantage and in a manner prejudicial to the Hindu interests.[92] Apart from this, the Mahasabha gained considerable popularity in its relief initiatives through the Bengal Relief Committee and the Bengal Provincial Mahasabha Relief Committee which did much work in Midnapore and interiors of East Bengal. Although it was alleged by the Muslim League in Bengal Legislature that the Mahasabha led relief organisations had practised much discrimination against aiding the Muslim and the Scheduled Castes[93], nevertheless the party's popularity grew unabated, with highest registration of membership from the Scheduled Caste dominant

[91] BLAP, September 27, 1943, pp.298-33
[92] FCR on the Political Situation in Bengal for the first half of June, 1943, Rajshahi Division, File No. 39/43, p.7
[93] *Star of India*, March 30,1944, p.4, IOR/ L/I/1/357

district of Barisal and the Bhola Sub-Division in 1944-45.[94] The Hindu Mahasabha in fact made optimal use of this opportunity to extend its *sangathanist* (Hindu mass contact) venture amongst the aggrieved lower castes through making a universal call for widespread establishment of 'Sakti Sangathan' and 'Sarbojanin' temples as 'the only way to include the down trodden and thereby the only way to unite the Hindu society, especially in the face of constant communal animosity.'[95] Even affiliated Hindu organisations like the Bharat Sevasram Sangha (BSS) had pooled in efforts to extend protection to the Scheduled Castes in acute economic distress. At a meeting of the BSS held in Calcutta, N.C. Chatterjee particularly urged the Hindus to save by all means the sturdy and powerful low castes such as the Namasudras, Paundya Kshatriyas and Bagdis.[96] Thus, apart from amassing numbers for a show of numerical strength, this was about a deeper Hindu vision of preserving and projecting the community's virile power vis-à-vis its religious opponent.

While the Nazimuddin ministry could not be entirely blamed for the famine, but major fallacies committed by it at a critical juncture definitely made matters worse. It brought serious discredit to the Muslim League led government and given that the party's edifice in Bengal had been in doldrums over factional squabbles, the only way to achieve exoneration was through resurrecting the organisation on one hand and on the other, pursuing an unrelenting propaganda for Pakistan. This was largely achieved through the efforts of Abul Hashim who infused a fundamental reorientation in the party's perspective through focussing on the socio-economic concerns of the Muslim peasants and, reorganisation of the party at the district level by making it more democratic thereby undermining the oligarchic control of the Dacca zamindars and the Calcutta business group. As a result of his zealous endeavours there was a rapid increase in the membership of the Muslim League in Bengal. By the end of 1944, Dacca had enrolment of over 100,000 members, Tippera had 52,000 members and Barisal had 160,000 members, such that the provincial total of new members in course of the year stood at 550,000.[97] The idea of Pakistan was clearly promoted as the only 'hope of salvation' for the Muslims, both in material as well as spiritual and cultural terms. The

[94] Rakesh Batabyal, *Communalism in Bengal: From Famine to Noakhali, 1943-47,* Sage Publications: New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London, 2005, p. 116

[95] *Hindustan Patrika*, July 20, 1944,'Hindu Sangathan' By Dr. Shyama Prasad. Mookerjee in *Shyama Prasad Mookerjee Papers*, Subject File No. 120, Instalment II-IV

[96] File No.: PH-510/44 (1944), Reports on Bharat Sevasram Sangha, Office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Special Branch, , p.4

[97] Ian Talbot, Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement: The Growth of the Muslim League in North-West and North-East India 1937-47, OUP: Karachi, 1988, p. 71

economic edifice of the new state was conceived as a socialistic state system 'based on the principles of utilitarianism and state ownership of all the larger concerns of national importance, including control of production and distribution.' Such a system which would be conducive for the betterment of masses was thought to be impracticable in united India with its 'established class of capitalism, landlordism, fighting and opposing to every stage such a consummation'.[98] The economic aspect of the Pakistan movement certainly appealed to the Muslim masses of Bengal who had been oppressed by the Hindu zamindars for a long time. The *ulama* or the religious preachers also played a fundamental role in advocating the formation of a new Muslim state as a moral right of the Muslim peasants, although the Muslim elite remained quite apprehensive of mass radicalism despite drawing obvious advantages for the movement through enlisting increased support.

The incessant propaganda for 'Pakistan' demand contributed to communal polarisation as the Muslim peasants were driven towards a new haven and the Namasudras towards their Hindu leaders. In a general atmosphere of deteriorating relations and growing distrust between communities instigated further by political groups attempting to assassinate each other's motives, the countryside in East Bengal saw constant clashes at the level of the masses as identities became more binary and oppositional. Cases of recurring disputes between the Namasudra and Muslim villagers were reported from Jessore, Narail Sub-Division and Khulna, which often degenerated to violence that would involve the entire community on either side.[99] While the Scheduled Caste representatives complained of police laxity in averting violence and partiality in punishing the perpetrators,[100] the local Muslim leaders alleged that ill feeling had been instigated by the Hindu political groups.[101]

Bengal Famine of 1943 had also propelled class based peasant resistance under the aegis of Communist led Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha (BPKS), which reached its culmination in the Tebhaga movement of 1946.[102] The movement which began in September demanded that the share of the sharecroppers should be two-third instead of a customary half share of the

[98] A perceptive article on the economic conception of Pakistan published in *Morning News*, July 28, 1943, p.54, in File No. P9- 562/40, Reports on Pakistan Scheme, Office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Special Branch.
[99] FCR on the Political Situation in Bengal for the first half of June, 1943, Presidency Division, File No. 39/43, p.3
[100] File No. PM-506/44, Communal Affairs, Office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Special Branch
[101] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p.220
[102] For an understanding of the movement read Asok Majumdar, *The Tebhaga Movement: Politics of Peasant Protest in Bengal, 1946-50*, Aakar Books: Delhi, 2011

produce. Rupture of traditional patron-client dependency relationship between landlords/money-lenders and peasants, which had become particularly manifest after the famine, drove the dispossessed peasants to action and the inception of the Tebhaga movement may be understood in this context.[103] BPKS, which had been inaugurated on the Congress platform to pursue a socialist agenda also included members of the Communist Party of India who chose to work with Congress after their party was declared illegal. Gradually however, the organisation became more radical and autonomous in its struggle against landlordism as well as British imperialism. The famine of 1943 allowed the BPKS to infiltrate the interiors of Bengal countryside where it actively worked in various parts of eastern Bengal and acquired huge popularity with the Rajbanshis of Dinajpur and Rangpur up north.

When the Tebhaga movement started the Namasudra sharecroppers also joined the struggle in Faridpur, Dacca, Bakarganj, Khulna and the Narail Sub-Division of Jessore. There had been instances of cooperation between the Namasudra and Muslim *bhagchashis* in Madaripur of Faridpur and in Narail, but this collaboration was only momentary which collapsed in face of communal altercations such as in Khulna and also in Jessore.[104] This was mainly due to a volatile communal atmosphere and the enticing Pakistan card being played by the Muslim League and the Muslim landlords to dissuade Muslim sharecroppers from participating in the Tebhaga struggle. Muslim landlords in Jalpaiguri, Dacca, Khulna, Faridpur and Rangpur had enticed their peasants through promising fulfilment of the share croppers' demands in Pakistan. Often the peasants were even unable to differentiate between the BPKS and the Muslim League and supported both in their own ways. Thus, in Narail the Muslim sharecroppers supported Pakistan and were pro-tebhaga at the same time. As Adrienne Cooper says, 'They perceived the BPKS as the vehicle for achieving economic demands and the Muslim League as representing their nationalist political ideals.'[105]

'Pakistan demand' itself meant almost anything and everything to a cross- section of Muslim masses. It may have been vague in the beginning but with subsequent politicisation it became an economic as well as emotional coagulant for the Muslim masses. For the Muslim peasantry it was the last resort and the ultimate utopia, which had been otherwise devastated by the cumulative effects of the economic depression of the 1930s, the military evacuations

[103] Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles*, p. 247
[104] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p.235
[105] Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles*, p.251

and 'denials' of the Second World War arrangements and the concomitant famine conditions of 1943-44. The Muslim League in power, when it failed to navigate through the immediate exigency played upon its communal card to buy popularity. A radical economic programme met with a religious agenda was optimally politicised to mobilise the Muslim peasantry and alienate them from Congress and CPI, which were otherwise embroiled in internal differences and mutual squabbles. The Namasudras on the other hand, faced with similar consequences of war and famine could not achieve any dividend out of the Pakistan appeal and increased communal tension with the Muslims led them further towards 'Hindu' mobilisation. While there were recurrent incidents of communal belligerence between the two communities, it reached a crest with the riots of Noakhali and Tippera in October 1946 that not only vandalised the two districts but also engulfed the neighbouring areas of rural eastern Bengal.

The riot began in the Ramganj police station area of Noakhali district on 10th October 1946 instigated through provocative harangues by local Muslim League leaders and soon engulfed the adjacent areas of Lakshmipur, Begumganj, Sonaimuri and Senbag in Noakhali and spread to the south, in the Faridganj-Hajiganj area of Tippera.[106] Tremors of violence were also felt in the neighbouring districts of Barisal, Faridpur and Chittagong. Bijoy Krishna Sarkar, a Scheduled Caste MLA from Jessore reported that the Namasudra dominant villages in the Chandpur Police Station area of the Feni Sub-Division had been massively attacked and devastated.[107] The villages of Haimchor, Chorbhanga, Chorkrishnopur, Chorbhoirobi, Chorsholadi, Gajipur, Monipur, Algi-Durgapur, Mahajanpur, Noyanilokhipur had been plundered and the hooligans set fire to the houses and shops of the Namasudra villagers. Ironically the Namasudras were targeted despite some of their leaders' supporting the Muslim League government. Bijoy Krishna Sarkar in fact attacked members of his own community in the government saying that the Namasudras despite their numerical dominance in these villages had failed to protect themselves from the Muslims as they had been given prior assurance by some Scheduled Caste leaders that the Muslims had no enmity with them, which found them completely unarmed for any possible confrontation.[108] This was around the time that a fundamental dichotomy in perspective had emerged within the Namasudra

[106] Riots in Eastern Bengal (Noakhali and Tippera), Confidential Report from Governor of Bengal to Secretary of State for India, dated October 16, 1946, p. 158, IOR: L/PJ/8/578
[107] *Usha*, December 2, 1946. An article entitled, 'Banglaye Toposhilider Durgoti' in File No: PH 564/45 (1945), Subject: Reports on Agitations by Depressed Classes, Office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Special Branch, p.65
[108] Ibid.

leadership, between those who resorted to an autonomous political discourse and those who wished to adopt an 'integrationist' stand.[109] Unfortunately, the adherents of Ambedkar's discourse striving for an autonomous bargaining counter in Bengal, in their endeavours to ally with the legitimate minority demands of the Muslim League had failed to gauge their own exclusion from a projected Islamic vision of economic emancipation.

Thus, the dynamics of Scheduled Caste politics in Bengal as represented by the Namasudras seemed to have operated at the multiple levels of caste, class and community. What this chapter arrives at is an essentially layered understanding, given that the colonial province of Bengal had been a boiling cauldron of numerous political developments in the last decade of its pre-independence era amidst fundamental economic changes in the agrarian realm. While legislative politics had been quite experimental, engaged in multifarious trials of political destiny pivoted on intrinsic Scheduled Caste demands, events on the ground predicated a more compulsive turn in face of increased communalisation of everyday life. But, to think that this had occurred while some of its representatives were still in alliance with a Muslim government is indicative of a gradual disjunction between a leadership which eventually became more focussed on institutional politics while the ground level realities were left unattended. With active mobilisation the Muslims had moved towards the Muslim League and the virile Namasudras became coveted by the Hindu Mahasabha and its affiliated Hindu bodies to strengthen the Hindu ranks. But the latter could hardly offer any constructive economic gain. Namasudras certainly could not gain as much as their Muslim cohorts could expect from the Pakistan promise.

[109] To be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

Negotiating Rights and Space: The Downtrodden and a Dividing Nation

Closing years of British rule in India saw a substantive essentialising of identities based on caste or religious community that encompassed even the marginal groups. A paradigm-shift in the position of the colonial state which eventually focussed more on religious difference rather than its earlier emphasis on social inequality while deciding transfer of powers had considerably provoked some Scheduled Caste associations to assert their distinctiveness from the Hindu majority with vengeance. Nevertheless, the growing menace of communalism with a discourse of partition gaining currency particularly in the Muslim majority provinces often forced the marginal groups to take sides. In Bengal, the Namasudras found themselves considerably divided. Here, the rhetoric of caste was invoked both in support of as well as in opposition to the discourse of partition, resulting in a dialectic which involved critical questions of their representation and ultimate political destiny.

Caste Politics in the Turbulent Forties

Quite early in the 1940s Scheduled Caste politics in Bengal saw an ideological diversion between factions which became more drawn towards the majoritarian discourse of nationalist integration and those who insisted on making distinct demands for their section. The politically assertive Namasudras found themselves considerably divided between the opposing stands. The Depressed Classes League led by Radhanath Das supported the Congress view while Scheduled Castes Federation led by Jogendranath Mandal in Bengal stood for its self-determination as a separate unit under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and was also supported by the Muslim League. There was also the Depressed Classes Association led by Birat Chandra Mandal which had allied with the Hindu Mahasabha after

the 'Rajah-Moonje Pact'[1] was signed in 1932. Political developments in Bengal had been part of a larger trend of metamorphosis when the discourse of caste turned more 'essentialised' particularly with Ambedkar's foundation of an exclusive platform for Scheduled Castes from all over India.

The All India Scheduled Castes Federation (AISCF/SCF) claimed to represent an autonomous political trajectory for the Scheduled Castes to unequivocally demand their legitimate political rights for economic emancipation and social upliftment as a historically deprived category. This alternative trend which saw many adherents in several parts of the country professed to distinguish itself from Congress politics. The bid towards an independent political intervention had attracted many Scheduled Caste groups thereby explaining the remarkable expansion of the Federation in the United Provinces as pointed out by Ramnarayan S. Rawat[2] and the decline of the Ad-Dharm movement in Punjab owing to the 'emergence of the Ambedkar alternative' as discussed by Mark Juergensmeyer in his study on the Ad-Dharm movement in Punjab.[3]

The need of an autonomous assertion had been prompted by a sudden *volt face* on the part of the British government during the War years on the one hand, and on the other by the implications of the Poona Pact. From acknowledging the Scheduled Castes as 'a separate political constituency whose consent must be secured in the process of Britain's transfer of power'[4], the British had suddenly defected to accepting them as part of the Hindu community, thereby upholding the Congress position. Cripps Mission's refusal to support the SC demand for separate representation in 1942 had been an immediate trigger for Ambedkar's establishment of the AISCF at Nagpur. A Press Statement made by Ambedkar immediately after the Depressed Classes Conference held in Nagpur on July 18-20 stated, 'It

[1] The Rajah-Moonje Pact was signed in 1932 by M.C. Rajah, President of the All India Depressed Classes Association with B.S. Moonje of the Hindu Mahasabha as a joint declaration demanding reserved seats for the Scheduled Castes.

[2] Ramnarayan S. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India*, Permanent Black: Ranikhet, 2012

[3] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20th Century Punjab*, University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982

[4] The British had continued to believe in the separate identity of the Scheduled Castes even during the 1940s. Lord Linlithgow had acknowledged this while offering dominion status to India, in his speech on August 20, 1940. Ambedkar was also invited to join the Viceroy's Executive Council around that time which led the nationalists to call him an 'imperialist stooge'. Even as late as 1944, Lord Wavell in his letter to Gandhi said that the SCs constituted a separate element in the national life of India and made the granting of full freedom to Indians contingent on framing a constitution for India to which all major players including the Depressed Classes would assent. See Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question, : Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, Permanent Black: Ranikhet, 2010, p.143

is quite obvious that the proposal for a Constituent Assembly is intended to win over the Congress, while the proposal for Pakistan is designed to win over the Muslim League. How do the proposals deal with the Depressed Classes? To put it shortly, they are bound hand and foot, and handed over to the Caste Hindus. They offer them nothing, stone instead of bread.'[5] Matters however came to a head with the Post-War newly formed Labour Government's effort to send a Cabinet Mission to India purported to resolve the political deadlock. The Mission which had proposed composition of a Constituent Assembly in order to draft a Constitution and an Interim Ministry to manage the transfer of powers had in its Award of May 16, 1946 recognised 'only three main communities' in India: General, Muslim and Sikh for representation in the Constituent Assembly. In this scheme the Scheduled Castes were classified under the General (Hindu) category and denied any separate representation despite an assurance given to Ambedkar in his meeting with the Cabinet Delegation on April 15, 1946.[6] As a compensatory gesture, the SCs were made part of an Advisory Committee to the Constituent Assembly but its powers were hardly clarified.

Ambedkar was obviously taken aback with this British proposition of transfer of power and since it further determined representation to the proposed Constituent Assembly and the Interim Ministry based on the election results of 1946, Congress by virtue of securing maximum SC seats in the last election emerged as their sole spokesman. Ambedkar not only criticised this British betrayal but it also led him to decode the implications of the Poona Pact with the Congress which he claimed as the real reason for the electoral defeat of Scheduled Castes Federation despite its candidates doing well in the primary elections. In his treatise, 'The Cabinet Mission and The Untouchables' published in 1946, Ambedkar unravels the sheer absurdity of the Poona Pact in representing the Scheduled Castes. It may be pertinent to quote him extensively on this.

> The criterion adopted by the Mission to decide whether the Congress did or did not represent the Untouchables was how many seats reserved for Untouchables were won by the Congress in the Final Election. This criterion was a false criterion because the results of the Final Elections are beyond the control of the Untouchables. Under the Poona Pact, the Final Elections are determined by the Hindu votes. The true criterion

[5] B.R. Ambedkar, 'The Cripps Proposals on Constitutional Advancement', in Narendra Jadhav (ed.), *Ambedkar writes*, vol. 1: Political Writings, Konark Publishers: New Delhi & Seattle, 2014, p. 193
[6] Vasant Moon (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 10, Govt. of Maharashtra: Bomaby, 1990, p. 538

> which the Mission should have adopted was to find out how the Untouchables voted, how many votes were cast in favour of the Congress and how many against the Congress. This can be judged from the results of the Primary elections only and not from the results of the Final Elections. For, in the Primary election, only the Untouchables vote. If the results of the Primary elections are taken as a basis, the decision of the Cabinet Mission would be found to be absurd and contrary to facts. For only 28 per cent of the votes polled in the Primary elections were cast in favour of the Congress and 72 per cent against it.[7]

The result of the 1946 elections was of critical importance for Bengal as later it was taken as an index of a decision on partition of Bengal. With the Congress securing 24 out of a total of 30 seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes in Bengal against an earlier claim of only 7 MLAs post 1937 election, Sekhar Bandopadhyay describes it as 'a complete reversal' in situation and 'an effective appropriation' of the Scheduled Caste movement by Congress.[8] Dwaipayan Sen however contests this 'integration' argument and instead emphasises on the constraints of the Poona Pact arrangement which had prevented the Scheduled Castes Federation from emerging successful.[9] Ramnarayan S. Rawat endorses a similar view while discussing anatomy of 1946 election developments in the United Provinces in order to explain the electoral defeat of SCF to Congress.[10] Dwaipayan Sen points out that only 29 candidates from Congress had contested out of 121 seats in the primary elections and of the 75 candidates who had succeeded, 25 were from Congress while 37 were Independents. These Independents however, largely failed to succeed in the general elections. In Jessore, a Federation candidate who had secured second highest number of votes in the primary elections failed to win either of the two seats reserved for SCs in the general election and in Faridpur, both the Federation candidates who secured second and third highest number of votes in the primary elections failed in the general elections. 'Such data', says Sen, 'raises serious questions about the circumstances under which 24 of these 25 Congress candidates

[7] B. R. Ambedkar, 'The Cabinet Mission and The Untouchables' in Narendra Jadhav (ed.), *Ambedkar writes*, p. 418

[8] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, p. 203

[9] Dwaipayan Sen, 'No matter how, Jogendranath had to be defeated': The Scheduled Castes Federation and the making of partition of Bengal, 1945-1947, *The Economic and Social History Review*, July-September 2012, vol.49 no. 3, pp. 327- 335. This article has also been published in his book, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018

[10] Ramnarayan S. Rawat, 'Partition Politics and Achhut Identity: A Study of the Scheduled Castes Federation and Dalit Politics in UP, 1946-48', in Suvir Kaul ed., *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001, pp. 111-139; Rawat, 'Making Claims For Power: A New Agenda in Dalit Politics of Uttar Pradesh, 1946-48' in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Yagati Chinna Rao (eds.) *The Past of the Outcaste: Readings in Dalit History*, Orient Blackswan: Hyderabad, 2017, pp. 252- 272

would emerge victorious in the general election, and whether the results of the general election ought to be read as a reliable indication of Dalit political preferences.'[11]

In the light of these circumstances where its political stake had been jeopardised, the Scheduled Castes Federation resorted to organising satyagrahas in various parts of the country as a protest against the Cabinet Mission Award and the Poona Pact. The satyagraha which was meant to take-off from Pune on July 15 to be continued further and expanded in other provinces was planned in a manner similar to that of the Congress movement of August 1942 - "When the struggle is forced to take the form of the Congress movement, we will do everything as the Congress did in the August disturbances", declared Ambedkar in an interview with the Associated Press of America.[12] The protest accused the colonial state of its 'complete breach of faith' with the Scheduled Castes, for the commitments made in the last twenty years. The satyagraha was deliberately staged in front of the legislative assemblies when in session in order to highlight the lack of 'true' Scheduled Caste representation in them. The purpose of the satyagraha was also to demand a 'blue print' from the Congress of their plan to protect the interests of the Scheduled Castes in the future Constitution of India since the party would be in three-fourths majority in the Constituent Assembly.[13]

The SCF in Bengal (BPSCF) took one of the earliest initiatives of protest against the Cabinet Mission's declaration. Jogendranath Mandal as its president invited Ambedkar to address a mammoth gathering at the Indian Association Hall in Calcutta on June 30 wherein he stated that he was disillusioned with the British government since its Cabinet Mission Plan had completely disregarded the Scheduled Castes' interests. Hence, Ambedkar emphasised on the urgency of placing the demands requisitioning for specific political rights and constitutional safeguards for their community, through their 'proper' representatives at the Constituent Assembly.[14] Mandal, who had been a close aide of Ambedkar, even helped him secure a seat

[11] Dwaipayan Sen, 'No matter how, Jogendranath had to be defeated', p. 328. This being the case, Sen also undertakes to further question Congress' hegemony on the SCs of Bengal based on the fact that later four MLAs who had won on Congress tickets had defected to the Scheduled Castes Federation. They were Dwarakanath Baruri, Haran Chandra Burman, Bholanath Biswas and Gayanath Biswas. They left the Congress as they could no longer sustain their faith in the party which had initially assured them of safeguarding the legitimate interests of their community.

[12] *Nationalist*, July 19, 1946 in File No: 581/46, All India Depressed Classes League, Office of Deputy Inspector General of Police, Intelligence Branch, WBSA.

[13] *Morning News*, July 22, 1946, ibid.

[14] *Hindusthan Standard*, July 1, 1946

in the Constituent Assembly from Bengal when his own political constituency had turned unreliable.[15]

Since the Cabinet Mission Award was detrimental to the specific interests of the Scheduled Castes it was unanimously criticised by SCs of both non-Congress as well as Congress camps. Jagjivan Ram, President of the Congress allied Depressed Classes League had criticised the Cabinet Mission for failing the valid expectations of the Scheduled Castes. He even considered the Poona Pact as a settlement between the Harijan and non-Harijan Hindus, much to contradict the inclusive claims of Gandhi, which Ramnarayan S. Rawat describes as radicalism in a leading Congress Harijan leader signifying important changes taking place at that time in the character and temper of Scheduled Caste politics.[16] Even Dharam Prakash, co-founder of the Depressed Classes League, had expressed his anxiety over Gandhi's and Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan's acceptance of the Cabinet Mission's proposals as 'best in the present circumstances' despite its injustice towards the Scheduled Castes. To quote him- 'We have got before us the opinions of these two great leaders who have well studied the intentions of the mission in their various meetings with them, and have studied the shortcomings of the declarations from the Indian point of view. We also do not doubt their honesty and good intentions. But, at the same time, we cannot conceal the unpleasant fact that, perhaps, the mission have overlooked the claims of the Depressed Classes by an error of their judgement and that wrong can still be rectified by the amendment of the proposals.'[17] It certainly points to the fact that even those who upheld integration with the Congress hardly meant an unqualified support to the party. Their apprehension over resolution of the caste question gets particularly foregrounded in the context of the Congress' acceptance of the Cabinet Mission proposals.

In Bengal, the Cabinet Mission became a pretext for an early union of various Scheduled Caste groups which pledged to act together irrespective of their internal differences, for protecting the larger interests of their community. Under the initiative of Bangiya Namasudra Samiti, Bengal Provincial Scheduled Castes Federation and Scheduled Caste Association met

[15] Jagadish Chandra Mandal has at length discussed Ambedkar's election to the Constituent Assembly from Bengal. See *Mahapran Jogendranath*, Vol. 2, Chaturtha Duniya: Calcutta, 1975, pp. 32-43. Also see Dwaipayan Sen, 'No matter how, Jogendranath had to be defeated', pp. 335-338

[16] Ramnarayan S. Rawat, 'Making Claims for Power', p.259

[17] Dharam Prakash's 'An Open Letter to the British Cabinet Mission and the Leaders of the Country' dated June 5, 1946 in File No: 581/46, All India Depressed Classes League, Office of Deputy Inspector General of Police, Intelligence Branch

on June 8 to denounce the Cabinet Mission's proposals and discussed the urgency to act in unison for vindicating their legitimate political rights.[18] The BPSCF under Jogendranath Mandal became particularly active in Calcutta and the districts to garner protest against the Award and also show its unity with the satyagrahis arrested in Pune, Nagpur and Lucknow. The Federation claimed that there were atrocities followed by large scale imprisonments in the Congress governed provinces with 621 punished in Pune itself that included 121 women.[19] On August 15, observed as the Anti-Poona Pact Day throughout the country by supporters of Scheduled Caste Federation, its Bengal branch decided to align its agitation with Muslim League's call for direct action around the same time. This was in line with Ambedkar supporting and encouraging his caste fraternity to partake in 'every kind of struggle' against the British proposals of May 16 vindicating any minority group, whether Muslim or Sikh, in their struggle for rights.[20] On that day, a procession of around 200 persons, which also included Sikhs and Muslims, paraded through the streets of Calcutta shouting protest slogans to finally converge at the Ochterlony Monument. At a meeting held subsequently with Jogendranath Mandal as the president, both British Cabinet Mission and Congress were condemned for bypassing the legitimate demands of the Scheduled Castes and it called upon members of both the minority communities, SCs and Muslims for a joint struggle under the leadership of Ambedkar and Jinnah.[21] The Muslim League also extended support to the Scheduled Caste demands.

The Federation led movement soon gathered momentum in various districts of eastern Bengal where it often acquired a dynamic character through occasioning additional protests against dominant forms of social oppression or collaborating with other minority groups.[22] Thus, Gopalgunj subdivision of Faridpur saw protests staged by Namasudras which combined anti-imperialist movement with slogans against the exploitative zamindari system. In Khulna, Scheduled Caste students moved in procession through the Khulna town shouting slogans denouncing the Poona Pact which terminated at the Khulna Municipal Park where a meeting was held under the leadership of Ramdayal Das of Faridpur. Other speakers at the meeting,

[18] *Jagaran*, June 15, 1946. The weekly journal of BPSCF has been accessed from the personal collection of Jagadish Chandra Mandal.
[19] *Jagaran*, August 10, 1946
[20] *Nationalist*, July 19, 1946
[21] File No. PH 564/46 (1946), Agitations by the Depressed Classes, Office of the Commissioner of Police, Special Branch
[22] File no: 191/46, Scheduled Caste Federation, Office of Deputy Inspector General of Police, Intelligence Branch

Manohar Dhali, Assistant Public Prosecutor and Secretary of the District Scheduled Caste Federation and Jyotish Chandra Mandal, a student, urged the Scheduled Castes to oppose the Cabinet Mission which had overlooked the interests of their community and to unite under the auspices of the All India Scheduled Castes' Federation. In Jessore, a meeting of the Scheduled Caste Federation in alliance with the Muslim League chaired by Rasik Lal Biswas urged the Scheduled Castes to fight against the Congress and the British for alleged neglect of the interests of the community. Protest demonstrations were likewise held in Bakarganj, Kanchrapara in 24-Parganas and Kharagpur in Midnapore.

Unfortunately for the Scheduled Castes Federation, its Anti-Poona Pact Day agitation coincided with the Calcutta riots on August 16, declared as Direct Action Day by the All India Muslim League to register its protest against the political impasse of the Cabinet Mission Plan. Under Ambedkar's directive to support all minority causes, the BPSCF had joined Muslim League's call for a complete *hartal* or a general strike in all spheres except essential services. The Muslim League had also made a generous appeal to various oppressed sections of the society to act in congruence with its purpose to oppose and agitate against British imperialism. The notification sent out on August 13 by the Secretary of the Calcutta Muslim League read- 'Representatives of minorities, suppressed and oppressed people and anti-Fascist parties who have been unjustly bypassed by the British govt. and who are ready to make common cause with the League in its fight for the equal freedom of the Muslims, the Hindus, the Scheduled Castes, the Adibasis, the tribals, the Christians and other people are welcome in the meeting.'[23] However, what was publicised to be a general strike had degenerated into one of the worst holocausts of Indian history popularly described as the 'Great Calcutta Killing'. Whether this was an aberration or intentionally machinated is a matter of conjecture since reportedly none of the European shops or persons had been targeted and also given the fact that around two thousand hooligans or '*goondas'* who had been confined under the Defence of India Rules during the war had been released between July and December, 1945 by the Suhrawardy government.[24] The massive communal killing which had resulted in a colossal loss of life and property did not even spare the Scheduled Castes. Ironically, Scheduled Castes Federation's support to the League in its observation of Direct Action Day made it party to an attack on its own people in Calcutta. Jogendranath

[23] *Star of India*, August 13, 1946, Bengal Affairs, IOR: L/PJ/8/655
[24] Secret Confidential Report by Frederick Burrows to the Viceroy and Governor-General of India, dated August 22, 1946 in Bengal Affairs, IOR: L/PJ/8/655

Mandal as President of the Bengal Provincial Scheduled Castes Federation issued a Press Statement in his weekly journal, Jagaran wherein he asked the SCs to remain neutral in and in the aftermath of the riot. Further, he defended his party's participation in Muslim League's Direct Action stating that the primary motive had been to act in unison with the minority groups that were disillusioned with the Cabinet Mission's proposals. While he had not expected such an inglorious turn in events, he insisted that it was purely a case of political tussle between the Congress and the Muslim League and not a characteristic communal riot.[25]

The Federation's agitation against the Poona Pact was vehemently opposed by the Depressed Classes League (DCL) despite similar anxieties shared by both organisations over the inconsequential offers of the Cabinet Mission. The DCL had in fact demanded proportional representation for the SCs in the Constituent Assembly at par with the Hindus (upper castes), Muslims and Sikhs. Its point of difference with the SCF however was quite fundamental as Jagjiwan Ram had clarified that the DCL wanted 'protection' for the Scheduled Castes and 'not their separation'.[26] Thus, the party expressed its sincere dissent over Ambedkar's call for a country wide satyagraha opposing the Poona Pact. The DCL in Bengal circulated a statement of resistance against Ambedkar, calling him leader of a 'microscopic minority' as had been proven in the last election. More so, the Federation's alliance with the Muslim League was particularly disapproved of, and even targeted after BPSCF's participation in the Direct Action Day, which had degenerated into a communal pogrom.[27] Both Bengal Depressed Classes League and Depressed Classes Association took to large scale vilification of the Federation and dissuaded Scheduled Castes from participating in its agitations against the British government and Congress. As the Secretary of the Bengal Depressed Classes League stated that the riot in Calcutta not only targeted upper caste Hindus but also Scheduled Castes. Allegedly, even the SCF's office in the Lower Circular Road had been vandalised as a result of the violence. Babu Kali Charan Das, Secretary of the Calcutta District Scheduled Caste Federation who had joined the Muslim League procession on August 16 was also attacked by hooligans and his house at Raja Bazar looted while the latter managed a narrow escape through seeking refuge in a Hindu locality in Muchipara police

[25] *Jagaran*, September 14, 1946.
[26] In its resolution of August 18, 1944 at the Nagpur Session the Depressed Classes League had emphasised the need to protect the interests of Harijans in any political settlement between the Congress, Muslim League and the British. While Rawat prefers to consider it as DCL's 'first break with the Congress', in doing so he tries to obscure the basic discursive difference with the Scheduled Castes Federation which was more fundamental. See Ramnarayan S. Rawat, 'Making Claims for Power', p. 258
[27] *Hindusthan Standard*, September 16, 1946

station area.[28] Birat Chandra Mandal, President of Bengal Depressed Classes Association also referred to the incidents of mass slaughter of the Scheduled Castes living in the slums of Calcutta.[29] The repercussions of the Calcutta riot were deeply felt in the rural tracts of east Bengal where riots ravaged the districts of Noakhali and Tripura. As Bijoy Krishna Sarkar, a Congress Scheduled Caste MLA from Jessore said, 'the damages done to the SC community are irreparable', after his tour in the riot affected Chandpur area of Noakhali.[30]

Notwithstanding, the Bengal Provincial Scheduled Castes Federation chose to continue to maintain its alliance with the Muslim League in government. Jogendranath Mandal, President of BPSCF and a cabinet minister in the newly formed Suhrawardy government was not convinced that the Scheduled Castes of eastern Bengal largely comprising his own co-caste members could be consumed with such communal acrimony. A Federation Relief Committee formed under his tutelage sent a representative group to the riot stricken areas, including Khagendranath Biswas, Keshab Chandra Ray, Suresh Chandra Majumdar and Satyendranath Baruri as its members, which actively toured and worked among the victims and appealed to the local Scheduled Caste and Muslim population to make peace and refrain from any conflict with one another.[31] A Joint Committee of the BPSCF and Muslim League was also formed including as members, Khwaja Nazimuddin, Fazlul Rehman, Chaudhury Muazzem Hossain, Abul Hashim from the Muslim League and Jogendranath Mandal, Rasik Lal Biswas, Bholanath Biswas and Dwarakanath Baruri from the Scheduled Castes Federation to promote communal well-being between Muslims and Scheduled Castes of eastern Bengal. An appeal circulated by the Joint Committee to members of both communities affected by violence in Dacca, Noakhali and Comilla after the Calcutta riot stated the political necessity of an alliance between Muslims and SCs bound by similar class conditions of deprivation as well as a minority status that would turn untenable in the event of their mutual conflict on ground.[32] For the Scheduled Castes Federation, a tactical alliance with the Muslim League made sense given its ideological incongruence with the Congress and the constitutional rebuff from the colonial state. The bond certainly proved productive as Jogendranath Mandal was

[28] File No: PH 564/46 (1946), Agitations by the Depressed Classes, Office of the Commissioner of Police, Special Branch
[29] File no: 191/46, Scheduled Caste Federation, Office of Deputy Inspector General of Police, Intelligence Branch
[30] Ibid.
[31] *Jagaran*, November 9, 1946
[32] Ibid.

offered to join the Interim Government as a Muslim League nominee which he did on October 15, 1946 as Law Minister, much to Congress' surprise.

Gandhi particularly disapproved of Muslim League's inclusion of a Scheduled Caste representative in its quota of Ministers which he said was 'not straight' given the party's professed belief in a two-nation theory for the Hindus and the Muslims. He considered it as yet another occasion where the League had 'come into the cabinet only to fight.'[33] Mandal however clarified that he had joined the Interim government as a representative of the All India Scheduled Castes Federation, which had suffered an electoral defeat in 1946 mostly to Congress. His joining gave the much needed representation that the SCF had been clamouring for. Ambedkar of course understood that it was a strategic ploy by Jinnah only to unnerve the Congress and fretted over the fact that the Scheduled Castes despite securing two seats in the Interim Government were 'tools' of the two major parties, one a Congress candidate and the other nominated by the Muslim League.[34] Nevertheless, for the time being, the SCF was at least content to have acquired a platform for negotiating its political demands. As P.N. Rajbhoj, General Secretary of AISCF said, 'If to-day we are thankful to the ML [f]or nominating Mr. J.N. Mandal to the Viceroy's Executive Council in recognition of our just demand, to-morrow we would not hesitate to walk alongside the Congress if that body were to cast aside its prejudices and support our cause.'[35]

The Discourse of Partition and Namasudra divergences

Mandal's nomination as a Scheduled Caste representative to the Interim Government by the Muslim League created enough brouhaha amongst the Scheduled Castes of Bengal that involved the fundamental question of who more legitimately represented the community. Radhanath Das, president of the Bengal Provincial Depressed Classes League had in an interview to the United Press on October 21, 1946 unequivocally opposed the nomination stating that the Muslim League could only claim to represent the Muslims and had no right to represent the Scheduled Castes. He also alleged that Muslim League's nomination of a

[33] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, October 17, 1946. Also *Manchester Guardian*, October 18, 1946, Riots and Disturbances in India, Eastern Bengal, May- October 1946, IOR: L/PJ/8/578
[34] Letter from Ambedkar to D.G. Jadhav, Chairman, People's Education Society, Bombay, in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, vol 2, p.87
[35] *Morning* News, January 1, 1947

Scheduled Caste representative was purely motivated by political reasons rather than genuinely helping the Scheduled Castes. Mandal responded with vengeance calling the DCL a 'pocket league' which only represented Congress' interests.[36] At a public meeting organised by the Delhi Scheduled Castes Federation, Mandal had, post his acceptance of office in Delhi justified an alliance with the Muslim League due to common minority interests. Not only that, he even proceeded to envisage a discourse of unity of all aggrieved minorities for a combined resistance.

> Mr. Mandal said that the Muslim League had taken upon itself the responsible duty of securing or giving freedom of emancipation not only to the Muslim Community, but to all the minority Communities of India. He believed that the Muslims were sufficiently strong to secure the rights and privileges of all the minority Communities. If all the Scheduled Castes, Adibasis and the Muslims, he said, combined together, they would become so strong that nobody in this country would be able to resist them.[37]

Thus, political trajectory of the Scheduled Castes in Bengal became clearly divided between those who allied with the Muslim League on grounds of seeking minority rights and those who stood at the opposite end to rebut any such alliance, given the increase in communal tension and hence, thinking it more rational to seek protection under the Congress' aegis. This ideological dichotomy however reached a crest with the subsequent partition proceedings which saw a dialectic between opposing groups of SCs enunciating what they thought was best for the community.

Meanwhile, British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee's statement made on February 20, 1947 on His Majesty's Government's intention to transfer power to the Indians not later than June 1948[38], set in pace an active campaign for a partition of Bengal by the Hindu leaders of the province. The first mammoth Bengal Partition Convention was organised by the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha at Tarakeshwar in Hoogly district between April 4 and 6, 1947 where N.C. Chatterjee in his presidential address made a declaration that 'as the Muslim League persists in its fantastic idea of establishing Pakistan in Bengal, the Hindus of Bengal

[36] *Jagaran*, October 26, 1946
[37] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, November 5, 1946
[38] Attlee's Statement in House of Commons, Nicholas Mansergh and Penderel Moon (eds.), *Transfer of Power*, vol. IX, London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1980, no. 438, pp. 773-775

must constitute a separate Province under a strong National Government.'[39] The three day conference passed a resolution in favour of partition of Bengal and authorised Shyama Prasad Mukherjee to constitute a Council of Action to establish a separate homeland for the Hindus of Bengal.[40]

The Congress Working Committee in its resolution of March 8, 1947 had demanded partition of Punjab, should India be partitioned, owing to the unleashing of extreme violence in the region in late February and early March after the downfall of the Khizr Hayat Khan's coalition ministry. The same resolution also implied a partition of Bengal that was specifically demanded by the Bengal Congress on April 9, 1947. The Executive Committee of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee urged an immediate setting up of two regional Ministries and demanded a separate province should power be transferred to the present League government, consisting of such portitons of Bengal that wished to remain within the Union of India.[41] According to Sucheta Mahajan, the real purpose behind Congress' demand had been to press a hard bargain on the Muslim League as division of the provinces would mean a fairly limited Pakistan in effect, which might convince the Muslim League to revert back to the idea of an unified India. But this effort proved futile.[42] And, as the question of partition loomed large, the dialectic in Bengal soon encompassed opinions of the Scheduled Caste communites, the vociferous ones in particular such as the Namasudras and the Rajbanshis since their terrorities were located in the Muslim dominant regions of east and north Bengal.

The Scheduled Castes Federation in Bengal took the lead in opposing the partition scheme, considering that the communal fiasco was only a transitional phase and division of the province on its basis would only do permanent damage. In a press statement issued on April 21, 1947 in New Delhi its leader, Jogendranath Mandal, declared that the majority of the non-Muslims in Bengal did not support the demand for partition of Bengal, which he said could

[39] Bengal Provincial Hindu Conference, Presidential Address by N.C. Chatterjee, Tarkeshwar, April 4, 1947, in *AIHM papers*, F. No. P-107/1947
[40] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, April 7, 1947
[41] Burrows to Mountbatten, April 11, 1947, *Transfer of Power*, p. 203
[42] Mahajan in fact says that Jinnah did not seem intimidated by Congress' demand for partition of Punjab and Bengal as he was determined on his demand for Pakistan and was perhaps convinced that a small state would be a viable one. See Sucheta Mahajan, *Independence and Partition: The Erosion of Colonial Power in India*, Sage Publications (Sage Series in Modern Indian History-I): New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London, 2000, pp. 273-274.

be well proven by a referendum. [43] He opposed the proposal for a separate state of West Bengal including the Burdwan Division consisting of the districts of Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapore, Hoogly and Howrah and, the Presidency division consisting of the districts of Calcutta and 24 Parganas, based on the Hindu dominance in those areas. Referring to the demographic lay out of the above mentioned eight districts he said that out of a total population of 1,59,32,646, Muslims comprised 30,75,215 and the total non-Muslim population was 1,28,57,431. According to the 1941 census the *Caste* Hindu population was recorded at 53,50,877, a category he said also included a number of backward communities whose conditions were akin to that of the Scheduled Castes. An estimated number of 5,22,453 belonged to this section which could be subtracted from the strength of Caste Hindus. From the remaining 80,29,007 of non-Muslim population, a vast section belonged to the category of Scheduled Castes. Thus, the Caste Hindus comprised only 37.5 % of the total non-Muslim population and the rest were 62.5 %. So even if cent percent of the Caste Hindus of the proposed state of West Bengal were to support partition, it would still not be a verdict of the majority as the views of the rest 62.5% non-Muslim population would have to be ascertained. Also, for the proposed inclusion of Jalpaiguri of the Rajshahi Division, being claimed as a Hindu majority district, Mandal said that the Scheduled Caste population of the district far exceeded that of the Caste Hindus and hence, their voices must prevail. On the whole, Mandal pointed out that a not so inconsequential majority of 1,40,90,982 Hindus would remain in East Bengal that would become part of Pakistan, while the proposed West Bengal would include only 1,28,57,431.

Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, leader of the Bengal Depressed Classes League and a member of the Constituent Assembly strongly repudiated the claims of Jogendranath Mandal that the Scheduled Castes of Bengal were opposed to partition of Bengal. As a Congress supporter he even assured the Scheduled Castes of East Bengal of adequate facilities of rehabilitation should they opt for migration to India under compelling circumstances.[44] At a largely attended meeting of the Scheduled Caste representatives at the Kalikata Kaibarta Samity hall on May 4, 1947 under the initiative of Congress MLA, Bijoy Krishna Sarkar, a new organisation called the Bengal Nationalist Scheduled Castes Association was formed which passed a resolution in favour of partition and opposed Jogendranath Mandal's stand against partition. The meeting however demanded proper safeguards for the rights and privileges of

[43] *The Statesman*, April 23, 1947
[44] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, May 3, 1947

Scheduled Castes in the constitution of the non-Muslim majority province in Bengal.[45] With their leaders showing conflicting interests, the Namasudras residing in East Bengal saw themselves involved in a propaganda war on partitioning of Bengal and the fate of their regions. Public meetings held in various places between May 3-15 at Wazirpur in Bakarganj, Tithamandra and Boutali in Gopalganj sub-division of Faridpur, Bahirdia and Bagerhat in Khulna, under the auspices of Congress and Hindu Mahasabha passed resolutions in favour of partition and demanded inclusion of their territories in the new state.[46] On the other hand, the gatherings of the Scheduled Castes Federation held at Kalsara village in Hoogly district, Kholapota under Basirhat Municipality in 24- Parganas and Mahabatgarr in Bardhaman emphatically protested against the perils that partition would unleash on the community.[47]

A concurrent movement for a united and sovereign Bengal led by Suhrawardy, Abul Hashim and Sarat Chandra Bose was also upheld by the Bengal Provincial Scheduled Castes Federation. At a meeting held in Harinarainpur in 24- Parganas on May 10, 1947 Jogendranath Mandal upheld the demand for a united Bengal and said that the province's partition would adversely impact on the Scheduled Castes of East Bengal who were mostly poor and sustained themselves through agricultural and fishing practices. The latter also pointed out that while the rich and influential Hindus belonging to the higher castes could migrate with convenience should partition occur, by no means could the poor and helpless Scheduled Castes be rehabilitated in West Bengal.[48] A resolution passed by the BPSCF at its meeting held in Calcutta on May 14, 1947 made an attempt to foresee the detrimental impact of partition on the Hindus of East Bengal in general since the latter would be rendered a minority and the Scheduled Castes in particular.

> The Working Committee of the Bengal Provincial Scheduled Castes Federation has given its very careful and earnest consideration to the proposal for partition of Bengal and the consequences that will follow if the partition does actually take place and has come to the irresistible conclusion that the division of the province into Hindu and Muslim Bengal is no solution to the communal problems. Instead of pacifying the situation, partition of the province will surely aggravate communal tension. It will reduce the Hindus of Eastern Bengal to an insignificant minority and consequently to

[45] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, May 6, 1947
[46] Representations regarding the division of Bengal into two separate provinces, Secretariat of the Governor General (Reforms) Dept., File No. 41/3/47- R Part II & III
[47] Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, vol. 3, Chaturtha Duniya: Calcutta, 1979, pp. 98-109
[48] *Star of India*, May 12, 1947

> a more hopeless and helpless position. Division will prove detrimental not only to the Hindus of Eastern Bengal but to the people of all communities of the province as a whole. Moreover it will check the growing political consciousness and ruthlessly crush the solidarity of the Scheduled Castes of Bengal who are scattered all over the province. While the Scheduled Castes of Eastern Bengal will be at the mercy of the majority community, the Scheduled Castes of Western Bengal will be subject to perpetual slavery of the Caste Hindus. Hence the Scheduled Castes of this province cannot be a party to a mischievous and dangerous mood. This committee, therefore, places on record its emphatic protest against the proposal for partition of Bengal in any shape or form and expresses its firm determination to oppose the partition move at any cost. This committee further urges upon the people of this province in general and the Scheduled Castes in particular to make a determined effort to stop the suicidal move for partition.[49]

The Scheduled Castes Federation in Bengal realised that partition would not only bifurcate the Scheduled Caste population but also crumble its movement for a distinct identity of the Scheduled Castes. It was based upon its strength of an autonomous assertion and belief in upholding the rights of the minority that the BPSCF had allied with the Muslim League. However, a possible vivisection of Bengal would render its entire political purpose redundant as the Scheduled Castes would become palpably reduced to an insignificant minority in both the halves. Jogendranath Mandal, in his zealous bid to oppose partition also garnered support from a considerable section of *Caste* Hindus like the All Bengal Mahishya Samiti and the Tippera- Noakhali Hindu Peoples Party which he claimed were against the proposed scheme of partition.[50] Mandal and his party's endeavour to oppose partition at all costs was severely countered by the Congress which took every effort to stifle it. Veteran Congress leader, Rajendra Prasad and President of the Depressed Classes League, Babu Jagjiwan Ram at a public gathering of the Scheduled Castes in Calcutta held on May 27, 1947 condemned the activities of Jogendranath Mandal and repudiated his propaganda that a majority of the Scheduled Castes opposed partition and rejected the demand for a Sovereign Bengal. [51]

Given an epic rise of communal discontent in Bengal at that time, it was only natural that an anti-partition movement would hardly reap positive results and as for Mandal's efforts,

[49] Representations regarding the division of Bengal into two separate provinces, Secretariat of the Governor General (Reforms) Dept., File No. 41/3/47- R Part III, p.123
[50] *Star of India*, May 27 1947
[51] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, May 29, 1947

Mayasuki Usuda points out that his agitation was too closely concerned with the interests of the Namasudra community based in eastern Bengal, to actually attract a wider public support.[52] However, it was certainly not, as Shyama Prasad Mukherjee claimed while addressing a public gathering at Kalibari in Delhi on April 22, 1947, that "To-day opinion is practically unanimous amongst Hindus, including scheduled castes and other minorities in Bengal that both for ending the communal strife and for self-development of the two major communities, Bengal must be divided into two provinces, comprising the predominantly Hindu and Muslim areas respectively."[53] Even if some Scheduled Caste groups showed significant signs of 'appropriation', they were also not entirely immune to concomitant anxieties over their compulsion to depend on their *Caste* Hindu leaders to guarantee their rights. Thus, Bijoy Krishna Sarkar while upholding Congress' decision to demand partition in view of the ongoing circumstances also demanded essential safeguards for the SCs and in doing so urged that 'the Caste Hindu leaders should declare that they will not go back on their words of honour, so often given to the depressed classes that they should at once start whole-scale reform of the Hindu social structure on the basis of equality.'[54]

The Scheduled Caste concerns however failed to strike a chord in the final transfer of power as the Statement of June 3, 1947 did not make any separate consideration of them in the entire process. The Bengal Legislative Assembly (excluding the European members) had to meet in two parts, one representing the Muslim majority districts and the other the rest of the province to vote whether or not the province should be partitioned. A simple majority of either part deciding in favour of partition would finalise the decision.[55] However, for the purpose of determining the population of districts, the 1941 census was taken as an authoritative index, which the Scheduled Castes Federation had so vehemently criticised as being unathentic, as it showed a sharp decline in the numerical strength of the Scheduled Caste population from the 1931 census.[56]. Jogendranath Mandal explained this as largely due to the propagandist efforts of the Hindu Mahasabha during the census operations which had insisted that the Scheduled Castes record themselves as just Hindus. As many as 7,85,000 people in the district of 24 Parganas recorded as 'Castes not returned' in the 1941 census were largely from the Scheduled Caste community, he said. If this was to be true as Mandal

[52] Mayasuki Usuda, 'Pushed towards the Partition: Jogendranath Mandal and the Constrained Namasudra Movement' in H. Kotani (ed.) *Caste System, Untouchability and The Depressed*, Manohar: Delhi, 1997, p. 257
[53] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, April 25, 1947
[54] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, May 6, 1947
[55] Statement of H.M.G. on June 3, 1947, *Transfer of Powers*, Vol. XI, pp. 90
[56] *Jagaran*, June 7, 1947

claimed, it certainly influenced the finality of the partition decision, which became a reality on June 20, 1947 when 58 votes to 21 votes in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly (Hindu majority) decided in favour of partition and 106 votes to 35 votes in the East Bengal Legislative Assembly (Muslim majority) decided that Bengal should not be partitioned.[57]

The decision towards partition set in pace a swift transfer of power such that the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten announced that power would be transferred to Indian hands on August 15, 1947 whereupon the two parts of Bengal would pursue their separate ways.[58] An official Boundary Commission was formed to ascertain the frontiers separating the two halves of Bengal, with Sir Cyril Radcliffe in chair to lead a panel of four judges nominated by the Congress and the Muslim League.[59] Interestingly, the Depressed Classes League, despite supporting the Congress had requested personal attention of the Viceroy for adequate representation of Scheduled Castes in the Boundary Commission in order that the rights and privileges of the community would not be overlooked.[60] Of course it was not considered. The resolutions passed by the DCL in its meeting held on June 5-6, 1947 sought preventive measures in apprehension of gruesome consequences for the SCs faced with partition. It feared forcible conversion of the SCs in the Muslim dominant provinces and hence petitioned for inclusion of a SC representative in the Boundary Commission. Second, it urged for adequate representation of SCs in the regional ministries of both Bengals to be formed in the near future considering that the community was equally divided between both parts. And third, the committee in apprehension of the growing missionary activities for conversion of SCs to their faith urged upon taking immediate steps to counteract such activities[61]

The official Boundary Commission incumbent with a task of demarcating boundaries for both parts of Bengal on the basis of contiguity of Muslim and Non-Muslim areas was also required to take into account 'other factors'.[62] The Hindu Mahasabha made extreme use of the provision of 'other factors' to demand as much territory as possible, thereby making a bid to

[57] Burrows to Mountbatten, dated June 20, 1947, *Transfer of Powers*, Vol. XI, No. 278, p. 536
[58] *AICC Papers*, Second Instalment, File No. PB- 3 (I)/ 1948
[59] Viceroy's 17th Personal Report, 16th August 1947, *Transfer of powers XII*, No.489, p. 758
[60] Letter from the All India Depressed Classes League to H.E., the Viceroy dated June 10, 1947, Ref. No. AI/DCL/ORG/106, p. 6 in Representations relating to safeguarding the Rights and Interests of Scheduled Castes, Secretariat Of The Governor General (Reforms) Dept., File No: 41/26/47-R
[61] Resolutions passed by the All India Depressed Classes League at its meeting of June 5-6, 1947, ibid, pp. 7-8.
[62] Report of the Bengal Boundary Commission and of the Punjab Boundary Commission, Legislative Dept. (Reforms Branch), File No. 68/47- R, 1947.

include areas which were inhabited by the Scheduled Caste community, for example the Namasudra populous Gopalganj sub-division and the adjoining territory in Faridpur and Bakarganj on the basis of being contiguous non-Muslim majority area. It was stated that the Scheduled Castes 'are an organic part of the great Hindu Society. It will not be proper to allow the Scheduled Caste Hindus who are clustered in certain well defined regions to be cut adrift from the predominantly Hindu population of West Bengal. All their traditions and sentiments are bound up with West Bengal.[63] The Congress also demanded inclusion of the Namasudra areas of the Dacca Divison, districts of Faridpur and Barisal, in West Bengal, which were otherwise Muslim majority districts but were contiguous to the non-Muslim majority area in Jessore and Khulna.[64] As for the Namasudras themselves, since many had extended support for partition and wished to be 'included' in India, their fervent efforts continued till the end. Thus meetings were held and resolutions were passed for the inclusion of the North Western portion of Bakarganj district including whole of police stations Gournadi, Wazirpur, Nazirpur, Banaripara, Swarupkathi and portions of Barisal Sadar police station including the Barisal town, Jhalakathi, portions of Kowkhali police station including Amrajuri and Saina Raghunathpur Unions as well as northern portions of Pirojpur police station including the municipal area along with the contiguous Hindu areas of Gopalganj Sub-division, Rajir and Kalkini police stations of Faridpur district.[65] The inclusion of these areas in West Bengal, being characteristically Hindu ones with a majority of Scheduled Caste population was demanded.

Between a Hindu Minority and Caste Identity: Jogendranath Mandal's Interlude in Pakistan

Post partition, the traditional Namasudra habitats of Barisal, Faridpur, Dacca, Khulna and Jessore became part of East Pakistan, despite proactive initiatives from the community, whether it was in opposing partition for a united Bengal or supporting it as part of the Bengali Hindu demand for a separate homeland. Radcliffe's Award had ultimately left behind a substantive Hindu population as minority in the severed eastern part of Bengal, which included a huge section of Scheduled Castes, comprising, apart from the numerically

[63] Memorandum for the Boundary Commission, submitted by the BPHM and the New Bengal Association in *Shyama Prasad Mookerjee Papers*, Instalments II- IV, File No. 160
[64] Atul Chandra Gupta to Acharya Kripalani, dated July 12, 1947, *AICC Papers* (1st Instalment) G-33/1947
[65] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, July 7, 1947

dominant Namasudras, others such as Paundya Kshatriyas or Pods, Jalia Kaibartas and Rajbanshis living up north.[66] Partition had ultimately failed to establish the religious homogeneity that had been its rationale thereby leaving behind a complex social demography on either side. Ambedkar, in an exchange of letters with Jogendranath Mandal during the closing days of British rule had emphasised on the obviously vulnerable situation of the Scheduled Castes when faced with the question of partition. He stated, "The Scheduled Castes were incapable of doing anything precisely with regard to the question of partition. They could neither force partition nor could they prevent partition if it was coming. The only course left to the Scheduled Castes is to fight for safeguards either in United Bengal or a divided Bengal." [67] Mandal, who had whole heartedly opposed partition of Bengal chose to join Pakistan which had come to acquire the Namasudra inhabited areas as per the official division. He was quite hopeful of the assurances given by the *Qaid-e-Azam* towards protecting rights of the minorities and was in fact elected as the temporary chairman of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan as well as became the Minister of Law and Labour in the first Pakistan cabinet. It certainly seemed a promising beginning for the Scheduled Castes of East Bengal and the Namasudras in particular. Notwithstanding, in less than three years' time Mandal submitted his resignation and migrated to India for good, expressing his disillusionment with the Pakistan government. His joining the Pakistan government came as an act which sought to defy the logic of partition and meant a hopeful continuance of a social movement and political representation for the Scheduled Castes in eastern Bengal that unfortunately ended with his resignation.

On August 10, 1947, at the inaugural session of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly attended by 52 out of its 69 members, Prime Minister, Liaqat Ali Khan had proposed the name of Jogendranath Mandal as its temporary chairman, which was seconded by Khwaja Nazimuddin and unanimously approved by the House. In his speech upon accepting the honourable post, Mandal had expressed his faith in the Muslim League and its supreme leader, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, for not only a just and fair treatment of the minority

[66] Radcliffe's Award based on the controversial 1941 census had left behind a good 11 million Hindus, including more than 4 million Scheduled Castes and a sizeable tribal population who were returned as Hindus in the census records. See Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India. 1947-1967*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007, pp. 107-108

[67] Letter from B.R. Ambedkar to Jogendranath Mandal, dated June 2, 1947, personal collection of Jagadish Chandra Mandal; also published in his book, *Mahapran* Jogendranath, vol. 4, Chaturtha Duniya: Calcutta, 1979, pp. 2-4

communities in Pakistan but also a generous one.[68] Under Mandal's tutelage the Scheduled Castes Federation which continued with its political establishment in East Bengal had sought its founder, Ambedkar's advice on the list of demands that it should place before the Pakistan government. Ambedkar had however cautioned Mandal against the Muslims as 'not greater friends of Scheduled Castes than the Hindus'.[69] With a predictable change in political climate after partition with the formation of a new Islamic state , Ambedkar had anticipated how power equations would vastly transform with the Muslims becoming a dominant force, no longer sharing an earlier minority status with the Scheduled Castes. This conversation happened despite SCF's political camaraderie with the Muslim League at that time.

Irrespective of the dialectic on partition which had seen the Scheduled Castes of Bengal in conflicting positions, now that East Bengal had become part of Pakistan, those who continued to stay seemed hopeful of their new national status and embarked upon fresh strategies of political sustenance and social security. A conference of the Scheduled Caste leaders of East Bengal held in October, 1947 reaffirmed loyalty to the state of Pakistan and rejected any possibility of migration from East Pakistan. In the interest of promoting amity between Muslims and Scheduled Castes as well as other minorities given the prevailing insecure times, the conference resolved upon setting up Village Welfare Committees in every union comprising members of the Muslim League and Scheduled Castes Federation and any other organisation that might be willing to cooperate in this goodwill gesture. The conference also urged upon the Pakistan government to acknowledge the SC status of those who had not been recorded as per their caste identity in the 1941 census due to alleged propaganda by the Hindu Mahasabha, much to their disadvantage.[70] According to Jagadish Chandra Mandal, it was at this meeting that Jogendranath Mandal had stated a tactical change in the principled electoral demand of the All India Scheduled Caste Federation for separate electorates, in favour of joint electorates with due reservation of seats for the SCs as well as other minority groups. It was for the larger interest of the minorities, he had professed. Soon after, Mandal claimed, the AISCF in India also accepted joint electorate with reservation of seats for the SCs.[71]

[68] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, August 11, 1947
[69] Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, vol. 4
[70] Copy of the resolutions published in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, vol. 4, pp. 47-49.
[71] P.N. Rajbhoj, Secretary of AISCF announced the party's resolution, upon Ambedkar's advice, to give up on its demand for separate electorate for the SCs and accept joint electorate with reservation of seats. *Star of India*, January 22, 1949

The first budget of East Pakistan allocated Rs. 1 lakh for the current financial year and Rs. 4 lakhs for the next year for educational purposes of Scheduled Castes students of the region.[72] It was most certainly interpreted as a favourable gesture by the Pakistan government towards the Scheduled Castes. However, not much later, a restraint in attitude became evident when a deputation of the East Bengal Scheduled Castes Federation met Jinnah on March 23, 1948 during the latter's visit to Dacca and demanded inclusion of two Scheduled Caste members in the East Pakistan cabinet from their party. The *Qaid-e-Azam* referred to the 'difficulty' in fulfilling such a demand since only 5 out of 19 members in the Assembly followed them. He said, "We are after all working on the lines of democracy, and if we were to take one of those five it would neither be good for you nor for the East Bengal Ministry, because it will at once be said, as far as we are concerned, that he was only a creature of the Prime Minister who had picked him up, whereas he did not enjoy the support of the overwhelming majority of the Scheduled Caste members of the Assembly, you will be told that the man chosen by the Premier from your group of five did not represent the Scheduled Castes."[73] Jinnah's rebuff to the SCF demand indicated that their earlier alignment of pre-partition days had become redundant and in view of the transformations effected by 'partition' it was incumbent on the SCs to embark on new strategies of negotiating with the state. It certainly called for an expedient unity within the community. Jogendranath Mandal took an initiative to unite the SC members of Congress and Scheduled Castes Federation of the East Bengal Legislative Assembly in order to build a potentially stronger interest group. He asserted that political division within the SC representatives led them to be ignored by both the Treasury benches as well the Opposition within the Assembly, which ultimately worked against the interests of their community.[74]

The demand for inclusion of a Scheduled Caste representative in the East Bengal cabinet was reiterated at a conference held by the East Bengal Scheduled Castes Federation on September 27, 1948, in the presence of Nurul Amin, Chief Minister of East Pakistan who also inaugurated the meeting. The conference which was attended by about 500 delegates from various districts additionally asked for adequate representation of Scheduled Castes in the Pakistan National Guards and Ansars and in all local self-governing and statutory

[72] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, March 17, 1948
[73] *Star of India*, March 24, 1948
[74] *Star of India*, July 23, 1948

institutions.[75] Meanwhile, the exodus of minorities from East Bengal which continued unabated showed a considerable presence of Scheduled Castes for the first time. Jogendranath Mandal as a Minister in the Pakistan cabinet however considered it to be a temporary phase caused by urgent economic necessities of purchasing food and other commodities at comparatively cheaper rates in Calcutta than was possible in East Bengal. He was certain that the migrants would eventually return as they had not disposed of their homes.[76]

The Scheduled Caste leaders consistently appealed to members of their fraternity against migrating from Pakistan and like the Pakistan government ascribed reasons of Hindu exodus to psychological and economic factors.[77] At a conference of the Scheduled Castes of East Bengal held in Barisal on December 16, 1948, Mukunda Behari Mullick said, "Hindus, particularly the scheduled caste, should not leave their land of birth in quest of uncertain fortunes leaving their best resources here. Both Hindus and Muslims should live in Pakistan as friends and brothers, as they have been doing so long."[78] Jogendranath Mandal in fact blamed the exodus of minorities from East Bengal on 'mischievous propaganda by interested parties' as he blatantly accused the upper caste Hindu leaders, especially in West Bengal, of generating hysteria in the minority community in East Bengal.[79] The inherent purpose was to induce sufficient confidence within the Scheduled Caste masses in order to dissuade them from migrating and to consolidate them into a cohesive minority group for a successful bargaining of essential rights and privileges from the Pakistan government.

However, political discourse aiming at collaboration seemed thwarted by ground realities which increasingly saw ordinary Scheduled Caste people becoming victims of communal violence. The land bound Namasudra peasants, comprising a substantial section of the remaining minority population in East Bengal faced large scale vandalism of life, honour and property in the subsequent series of riots in Khulna, Dacca and Barisal in 1949-50. In contrast to a general perception that partition violence in case of Bengal unlike Punjab was more of a

[75] Weekly Report (Secret) No.39 for the period ending 3rd October 1948, From the Deputy High Commissioner For the United Kingdom in Pakistan, Dacca, Fortnightly Reports, East Bengal, IOR: L/PJ/5/323
[76] Ibid, pp.181-182
[77] *Star of India*, November 17, 1948. The Director of Publicity, East Bengal had issued a press note on October 23, 1948, where in the real cause of Hindu exodus from East Pakistan had been described as purely psychological and economic. Weekly Reports from East Bengal, July-December, 1948. IOR/L/PJ/5/323
[78] *Star of India*, December 17, 1948
[79] *Star of India*, January 15, 1949

small-scale and sporadic nature which created more psychological trauma footnote than actual physical harm, these were full scale riots that had propelled mass migrations across border.

In Khulna, the riot was instigated after a police raid of the Kalshira village in the Bagerhat subdivision on December 20, 1949 allegedly on grounds of arresting communist activity that had led to a confrontation with the villagers, mostly Namasudras, causing death of a policeman. The incident provoked the police assisted by Ansars and local Muslim mobs to besiege and vandalise not only Kalshira but other adjoining villages of the Chitalmari Union. Manohar Dhali, MLA, Khulna sent a report of the atrocities committed on the villagers to Jogendranath Mandal as a Scheduled Caste minister of the Pakistan cabinet. He described, "All sorts of atrocities were committed in that area of Chitalmari Union. Women were criminally assaulted and raped, properties looted, cattle taken away, persons brutally assaulted as a result of which some had already died, women were kidnapped, converted, and married, images of deities broken, cows have been slaughtered and some families have been converted to Islam. All these atrocities are said to have been done by the Muslims of the locality with the help of the police." Dhali in fact provided an exhaustive list of the kind of atrocities endured by the villagers based on first-hand information.[80] A similar pretext of suppressing communist activity in Rajshahi also led to police oppression on the Santhal villagers of Nachole and Gomostapur.[81]

The Khulna riot was soon followed by a riot in Dacca in February 1950 at a time when a bilateral meeting of the Chief Secretaries of East and West Bengal was taking place on February 9-10. The riot was instigated by a demonstration of East Bengal Secretariat employees which led to considerable violence, arson and looting of minority population in the city. Its impact was also felt in the adjacent areas of Narayanganj, Chittagong and surrounding villages of Dacca. Brutal incidents of trains running via Dacca carrying corpses of Hindus were also reported. On February 12, a party of Hindus evacuating to Calcutta while

[80] Manohar Dhali (MLA, Khulna) submitted a detailed report of the riot to Jogendranath Mandal, as he appealed for help and justice for the people of his constituency. Of the several atrocities committed on the villagers he enumerated types such as forcible conversion of the minority in the villages, Kalshira and Rayerkul; criminal assault and rape of women; plunder of houses, cattle and the Jhaladanga Bazar; slaughtering of cows and breaking of religious idols; physical assaults and extortion by the local police in the name of assuring safety. Letter published in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, vol. 4, pp.101- 106,

[81] Fortnightly Report of the Deputy High Commissioner for India in Pakistan, Dacca, for the period ending January 31, 1950 in *Shyama Prasad Mookerjee Papers*, Instalments II- IV, Subject File no. 159

waiting to emplane at the Kurmitola airport was attacked by an armed mob of Muslims resulting in the death of at least 12 and injuring several others.[82] The repercussion of the Dacca riot was also felt in Barisal, when trouble began in the Barisal town, in reaction to a sudden rumour that Fazlul Huq had been murdered in Calcutta. Several cases of arson and assault were reported from Gournadi, Jhalakati and Nalchiti in the Sadar sub-division.[83] Namasudras being quite populous in the suburbs of Dacca as well as in Narayanganj and in the villages of Barisal faced the brunt of communal vandalism.

Most of these riots were products of a vicious cycle of propaganda and counter-propaganda carried out by the press, rumours and refugee accounts on both sides of Bengal. Thus, the riot in Khulna had its repercussions on the Muslims in Murshidabad and Calcutta instigated by the refugee stories of atrocities, while arrival of the Muslim refugees in Dacca carrying stories of the Calcutta riot created fresh trouble for the Hindu minority and so the cycle kept making rounds.[84] What made things worse was the state agencies turning hostile and oppressive making the minority more insecure in an already volatile environment. For the first time, the riots in East Bengal had resulted in a mass scale migration of the poorer sections of the minority, hugely composed of Namasudras who had not migrated at the time of partition. [85] This was in contrast to how a majority of the upper caste Hindu *bhadralok* had reacted.[86]

The sudden exodus of a 'different' demographic hue became a matter of grave administrative concern for the rehabilitation regime in India as it came to be critically discussed across the various political circles. Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, while expressing his grave

[82] Weekly Report (secret), No. 7, for the period ending February 16, 1950, from the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan, Dacca. IOR:L/PJ/5/326
[83] *Hindusthan Standard*, February 25, 1950
[84] Haimanti Roy calls this an 'ecology of fear' which was generated through routine violence mediated by 'actual singular incidents of petty theft, loot, kidnapping of women, and murders; destruction and/ or defacement of religious icons; by verbal threats, rumours aimed at maximizing minority insecurities; and through embellished representation of communal incidents in the public media, political speeches, and thinly veiled state propaganda.' She says that such an anxiety-ridden environment fed into a continuous ecology of fear which ultimately acted as catalysts for the riots of 1950. See Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947-1965*, OUP: New Delhi, 2012, pp. 148- 149
[85] In the years 1949 and 1950, the total influx of refugees from East Bengal after the riots was 17.88 lakhs, with 2.13 lakhs in 1949 and 15.75 lakhs in 1950. See P.N. Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, Publications Division: New Delhi, 1972, p.19
[86] Cross-border migration after partition of Bengal had occurred in stages, with a large section of middle class Hindus having migrated in the immediate aftermath of the partition announcement, while most of the Scheduled Caste agriculturalists who had direct interest in land had stayed back. This differential aspect of refugee migration will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

anxiety for the Hindu minority facing tragic communal violence in various parts of East Pakistan, in his parliamentary address made on February 23, 1950, nevertheless declined any suggestion for an 'exchange of population' between both parts of Bengal in a manner of resolving the problem. He said that "It is true that in Punjab vast migrations took place, bringing infinite suffering in their train. They took place because we became the play of elemental forces and two newly formed Governments had suddenly to face this crisis. There is no such excuse now and both India and Pakistan should have the strength and capacity to perform their primary function of giving security and confidence to their people, whoever they might be."[87] It meant that the Indian government endorsed offering of only temporary refuge to those forcibly displaced from East Bengal but did not favour large scale immigration on a permanent basis. The Hindu Mahasabha on the other hand, hankered on rescuing as many Hindus as possible from East Bengal considering it futile to engage in any form of dialogue with the Government of Pakistan. The communal attack on and cordoning of the Namasudra villages of Khulna was considered 'a planned and deliberate one', as an experiment to overpower these Hindus of a martial temperament, whose success would allow the Pakistan government to suppress similar such and less stronger bastions.[88] In view of a speculated worsening of conditions for the Hindu minority in East Bengal, Ashutosh Lahiri, General Secretary of the All India Hindu Mahasabha, called for their 'wholesale migration' as the only pliable alternative which could be effected through 'a mutual transfer of population' by sending off the Muslims of West Bengal, Assam and Bihar to East Pakistan.[89]

Meanwhile, in East Bengal, in view of the recurrent attacks on the Scheduled Castes, the East Bengal Scheduled Caste Federation in an emergent meeting with the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Liaqat Ali Khan on March 20, 1950 demanded to 'know the definite policy of your Govt. adopted towards the Scheduled Caste people.' They reiterated their earlier demands for the well-being and development of their community, which were yet to be fulfilled by the government. Baffled by their current state of insecurity, the party insisted on the consideration of 'essential' demands such as their representation in the administrative

[87]Prime Minister's Statement in Parliament on February 23, 1950, regarding recent events in East and West Bengal, *Shyama Prasad Mookerjee papers*, Instalments II-IV, Sub File no. 160

[88] Note for the Cabinet, Ministry of Rehabilitation, on 'Arrangements for the reception of displaced persons coming out of East Bengal' dated February 24, 1950 in *Shyama Prasad Mookerjee Papers*, Instalment II-IV, Subject File No. 162

[89] Statement by Ashutosh Lahiri at a Press Conference held in Hindu Mahasabha Bhawan, New Delhi dated March 27, 1950, *AIHM papers*, F. No. P-129/1950

services of the state through recruitment in police, Ansars and other departments and inclusion of two Scheduled Caste ministers in the cabinet of East Bengal government. This apart, the deputation also submitted a list of suggestions taking into cognizance the larger interest of the minority community.

1. Pakistan should be immediately declared a Secular State.
2. Any form of conversion, willing or forceful should be declared illegal for certain years.
3. Imposition of collective fines on the majority community in areas affected by communal violence.
4. Murder or culpable homicide of the minority shall be sternly dealt with by giving exemplary punishment to the guilty.
5. Appointment of a Relief and Rehabilitation officer and a Special Commissioner for the minorities to look into their interests and security.
6. Compensation for destruction of minority property during disturbances.
7. One-third of the total strength of all services be represented by the minorities in the administration of the state, especially in the Police, Ansars, Judiciary and the Executive.
8. Minorities should be supplied with arms for self-defence.
9. Government to not only guarantee but arrange for adequate protection of minorities and if that failed to arrange for their peaceful evacuation to safer zones under strict military escort.
10. Torture and oppression on innocent Hindus by govt. officers at several places to be immediately checked.
11. Representation of all groups in the East Bengal cabinet and a broad based Ministry with minorities be formed without delay to ensure unity of action and greater confidence in the people.
12. Differential treatment of the minorities be abandoned as well as unnecessary harassment by the Ansars.
13. Minorities be assured, in the event of war between Pakistan and India, of measures to be taken to protect their lives and properties.
14. Inflammatory statements in the press and sinister comment and views on the communal situation by journals and newspapers be checked and controlled at once.
15. An Inter-Dominion conference to be initiated by the Government for solution of the communal question which would also include representatives of the minority.[90]

[90] Copy of the resolutions/ suggestions published in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, vol. 4, pp. 137-138

These 'suggestions' necessarily point out the state of anxiety that had gripped even the Scheduled Caste representatives who had been strong allies of the Muslim League since pre-partition days. It is indeed ironical that the SCF in East Bengal should seek protection under the umbrella of Hindu minority.

In a highly belligerent atmosphere between both countries when the spectre of war loomed large, the two Prime Ministers, Jawaharlal Nehru and Liaqat Ali Khan met in New Delhi in the first week of April to enter into a mutual agreement on the state of minority affairs. It came to be known as the Nehru- Liaqat Pact or the Delhi Agreement, which was deemed as a hopeful development and a remedial turning point in inter-dominion relations that aimed to extend reassurances to the lingering minority on both sides. In its aftermath, both governments claimed a relief in migration figures, indicating a return of the migrants to respective homes.[91] Prominent leaders from the minority communities such as Siris Chattopadhyay from Congress and also leader of the Opposition along with Jogendranath Mandal and others toured various parts of East Bengal and appealed to the Hindus not to migrate but 'trust the Muslim majority who welcomed them in their midst, and have confidence in the Government that was seriously trying to safeguard their interests.'[92] Mandal saw a hopeful development in a subsequent rise in the number of Hindu returnees that had a large percentage of Scheduled Caste cultivators.[93] Surprisingly, not much later Mandal submitted his resignation on October 8, 1950. Just when it seemed that the prevailing situation could improve, his resignation came as a paradox, for he had been a steady proponent of Pakistan and also held an honourable portfolio as the only non-Muslim Minister in the Pakistan government.

A fairly detailed resignation letter, running into twenty-one pages indicated that Mandal's decision to resign was not an abrupt one. It was the end of a long drawn dilemma resulting from a growing disillusionment with the way Pakistan as a state was functioning. The letter made significant revelations of – communal disturbances in East Bengal; the farce of Delhi

[91] The Relief Commissioner in East Bengal claimed that migration of the Hindus was on the wane and several thousands who had crossed the border to West Dinajpur were returning to their homes in East Dinajpur. There were other similar cases. The Indian High Commission in Dacca seemed more optimistic than before and said that although the exodus continued, it was without its earlier sense of urgency and panic. See Weekly Report (Secret) No. 16 for the period ending April 20, 1950, from the Deputy High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in Pakistan, Dacca, IOR/L/PJ/5/326

[92] Weekly Report (Secret) No. 18 for the period ending May 4, 1950, from the Deputy High Commissioner for United Kingdom in Pakistan, IOR/L/PJ/5/326

[93] *The Statesman*, September 12, 1950

Pact; social harassment and economic boycott of the Hindu minority; government's insincerity towards welfare of the SCs and; ultimately reasons for his own complicity. Mandal mentioned an array of communal incidents in Gopalganj, Habibganj in Sylhet, Nachole in Rajshahi, Kalshira in Khulna, Dacca and Barisal, which were often politically motivated but mostly machinated with due connivance of the state authorities and in which ordinary people were targeted largely belonging to Scheduled Castes and also tribes. The farce of the Delhi Pact was pointed out when Mandal said that "…neither the East Bengal Govt. nor the Muslim League leaders were really earnest in the matter of implementation of the Delhi Agreement."[94] Apparently the government in East Bengal seemed unwilling to take effective steps to implement the Pact. He also seemed to retract from his earlier statement that a large number of Hindus, mostly Scheduled Caste agriculturalists were returning after conclusion of the Pact, which indicated that confidence had been restored. He now said that they had returned either because they could not find rehabilitation in West Bengal or other parts of India or the perils of refugee life had driven them back to their original homes or they had simply returned to dispose of their properties. Further, he revealed rampant practises of economic boycott of the Hindus such as lawyers, doctors, shop keepers, traders and merchants by the Muslims as well as every day forms of social harassment and religious encroachments that the Hindus had to endure. Thus, he said that riots were not the only reason which explained such large scale Hindu exodus but other factors such as search for means of livelihood and psychological solace were equally important reasons. And despite this, his continued complicity with the government was perhaps in view of safeguarding the interests of the Scheduled Caste community in East Bengal. But Nurul Amins's appointment of Dwarkanath Barori as a Minister representing the minorities, bypassing Mandal's suggestions for the post and whose selection was also disapproved by the Congress leader, Siris Chattopadhyay had ultimately convinced Mandal of a political ploy to divide the SCs and hence the government's insincerity towards their actual causes. In this regard he also pointed out the Pakistan government's evasive tactics to shelve legitimate political demands of the Scheduled Castes such as their demand for a joint electorate with reservation of seats. Mandal's revelations were certainly a curtain raiser. Given the fact that he had been part of the Pakistan government, his was an insider's account of an otherwise cordoned off reality. However, Mandal's resignation had set in force a lot of speculations in both countries.

[94] Jogendranath Mandal's letter of resignation to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Liaqat Ali Khan, dated October 8, 1950 in File No. PM 553/54 (IV), East Pakistan Refugees, Office of the Commissioner of Police, Special Branch

Mandal's resignation from the Pakistan government created a furore in the Indian press as the editorial section of the *Hindusthan Standard* called his confessional letter a 'window on Pakistan', which seemed to ratify all allegations against Pakistan. As it wrote, '…coming as they do from one who had not only the opportunity to know them from inside but who had actually been associated with the policy making that is responsible for the ghastly occurrences in Pakistan their reiteration has a tremendous significance.'[95] It allowed the extremist Hindu organisations of West Bengal who had been crying foul of minority oppression in East Bengal to demand an abandonment of the inter-dominion agreement. Mandal's decision to quit was however, upheld by his mother organisation in India, the All India Scheduled Castes Federation, as its General Secretary, P.N. Rajbhoj, considered his statement an eye opener for the Indian Government to the real situation in East Bengal and the deplorable condition of the Scheduled Castes who formed the bulk of the minority community there.[96] The Pakistan Premier, Liaqat Ali Khan, said that Mandal's resignation letter had not reached him directly and he came to know of it only through the press reports. But for Mandal, Khan said, Pakistan had always been a 'bargaining counter' as he had been opposed to the partition of Bengal and hence his decision was a natural corollary to his belief.[97] Nehru, on the other hand, was quite dispassionate about Mandal's resignation, which he said could hardly resolve matters between the two countries.[98] Meanwhile, whether Mandal's resignation had a direct impact or not, the exodus from East Bengal continued unabated, with the census of 1951 recording a refugee population of 2,099,000 in West Bengal, which included a huge section of low caste Hindus of meagre means.[99]

Jogendranath Mandal's resignation was a watershed in Scheduled Caste politics of Bengal in more than one way. It meant an end to distinctive politics of self-representation of the Scheduled Castes of Bengal that seemed un-thwarted by the disjunctions caused by the phenomenon of partition in 1947. Ultimately, it symbolised an eventual crippling of the vigour of SC politics in both halves of Bengal, much to confirm Mandal's stated

[95] *Hindusthan Standard*, October 10, 1950
[96] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, October 11, 1950
[97] Prime Minister, Liaqat Ali Khan's Statement on resignation of Jogendranath Mandal, D/16-10-50 (Pakistan News for favour of Publication) published in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, vol. 4, pp. 25-30
[98] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, October 17, 1950
[99] 1951 census, p.305

apprehensions, owing to increased communal oppression in the East and perils of being a refugee in the West.

Chapter 4

Partition Displacement and Reincarnations of Caste

Partition of Bengal in 1947 not only resulted in displacing the Namasudras living in East Bengal but also dismantled a once vibrant movement of political assertion by a lower caste community. In the post-colonial, Indian state of West Bengal, their newly acquired 'refugee' status predicated fresh terms of struggle for social emancipation and political rights. Received historiography on the social impact of Partition has more often claimed what may be understood as a 'levelling' discourse of victimhood for the displaced population, across their caste and class barriers, since the perils of territorial dislocation and forced migration had affected all sections of the Hindu minority. What it fails to capture or deliberately overlooks is a fundamental, differential impact of Partition on different sections of the displaced demography. The 'levelling' theory in fact tends to obscure the variations in experiences of the lower caste, Namasudra refugees, who had migrated late, in huge numbers and, under circumstances quite different from that of the *bhadralok* migrants. It also seeks to downplay their separate struggles towards rebuilding new homelands. While caste based movements for social uplift and political representation had eclipsed in the face of more relevant rehabilitation concerns but, it did not mean that social hierarchy and practices of differentiation had become redundant, even within the refugee circuit. Social disabilities and discrimination had made it more difficult for the Namasudras but, there were also demonstrations of strength and agency whenever possible. And, to that extent, they might have played a role in once again changing the established power equation of the state in 1967.

‘Forced’ Migrations of the East in Perspective

The exodus of refugees from East Pakistan had been a continuous process which had started even before partition, with the outbreak of communal riots in Noakhali in October, 1946. The process became more vigorous after Partition, from the end of 1947 and since then continued unabated on small and large scale. When compared with the Punjab ‘situation’, the magnitude of the problem has often been described as less catastrophic in case of West Bengal, though ultimately, the cumulative effect of continuous influx of refugees over a prolonged period on the eastern side proved to be equally disastrous. While Punjab hardly saw any pre-partition incident of displacement, most of its migrations were complete by 1950.

The social character of migrations in Bengal also depicted a peculiar hierarchy. The immediate years after partition saw migration of mostly Hindu gentry and merchant and professional classes belonging to upper castes, who chose to leave East Bengal not under circumstances of experiencing actual violence but under a perceived threat from the Islamic majority community. Nilanjana Chatterjee understands this discourse of victimhood of the East Bengali refugee in terms of a persisting insecurity over loss of *dhon* (wealth) *maan* (honour) and *pran* (life).[1] The Hindu *bhadralok* had migrated early largely out of a fear over losing their *dhon* and *maan* rather than *pran* as a numerically and politically subordinate group in a Muslim country. Though a sense of loss of their home and hearth was paramount, but they managed to carry over assets and skills across the border to help them sustain themselves while many had relatives and connections to depend on. The riots of December, 1949 and February, 1950 in Khulna, Barisal and Dacca which had spill overs in adjacent districts as well had led to a fresh spate of exodus of a massive scale and a different demographic composition. The ‘new’ migrants were ordinary, poor people from humble occupations, belonging to lower caste and tribal communities. They included huge sections of Namasudra agriculturalists who mostly lived in these districts and had become targets of communal vandalism. These people migrated under conditions entirely different from those which might have propelled the elite sections.

[1] Nilanjana Chatterjee, ‘Interrogating Victimhood : East Bengali Refugees Narratives of Communal Violence’; https://www.swadhinata.org.uk/chatterjeeEastBengal-Refugee.pdf, pp.13-17

Most Namasudras were agriculturalists of modest means who earned their living as sharecroppers, agricultural labourers or small peasants and for whom migration seemed a difficult prospect. They had small landholdings which they cultivated with all their skills and energy. Most of them were illiterate and had rarely worked outside, beyond their regions in East Bengal. In fact, despite being densely populated areas with increased pressure on lands, the fertile and riverine tracts of eastern Bengal could easily sustain its people than the comparatively less productive regions of West Bengal. Moreover, from early twentieth century onwards, the peasantry reaped some profits through cultivation of cash crops such as jute, which at least until the depression of the 1930s fetched a good price in the market. War and partition helped prices to recover to an extent. On the whole, agricultural conditions in eastern Bengal had never been that bad for its peasants to ever consider migration as a viable option.[2] Thus, even at the time of partition, very few of them had left. Only when circumstances deteriorated for the worst with recurrence of riots in the rural areas or acute economic hardships or in other words, the threat to their *pran* ultimately forced them to leave for good.

Unlike Punjab, in East Pakistan, the low castes were deliberately targeted in the post-partition upsurge of communal violence, which also saw retaliation on the Muslims in West Bengal. Such incidents were recorded from the border district of Nadia where Namasudra migrants who had been evicted from their native villages in eastern Bengal took their revenge on the Muslim villagers and drove them to Pakistan.[3] According to Ravinder Kaur the low caste people in Punjab could maintain a distance from the partition riots which they saw as a confrontation between the Hindus and the Muslims and were never directly targeted, except by mistake.[4] The contrast in the two situations explains a significant dilemma facing the low caste refugees in West Bengal, Namasudras in particular, who had been at the vanguard of the Scheduled Castes movement in the erstwhile undivided state, when a combination of religious and refugee identity seemed to supersede their caste identity.

With regular influx of refugees from East Pakistan until its independence and formation of Bangladesh in 1971 the official estimate of the number of arrivals were an enormous 5.3

[2] Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007, pp. 116- 117

[3] File No: 1809-48 (Nadia), Subject: Reports on activities of Refugees in Nadia district, Office of Deputy Inspector General of Police, Intelligence Branch

[4] Ravinder Kaur, Narrative absence: An 'Untouchable' account of Partition migration, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 42:281, 2008

million and quite comparable with the situation in East Punjab where partition violence was considered more genocidal.[5] Even, as early as in 1951, the total number of refugees in Punjab was 2.4 million while West Bengal was not far behind with 2.1 million. By contrast, rehabilitation measures undertaken by the central government were far from being equivalent for both the states. While a concrete plan was undertaken for Punjab, in case of West Bengal it was more of providing temporary relief. This was also owing to the fact that there had been a 'two way movement of the refugees' in the West such that the new arrivals were matched with departure of the older population that allowed the government to plan rehabilitation on the basis of available evacuee property. On the eastern side, the government refused to accept that the influx of refugees was a permanent phenomenon and believed that those who had come would return to their native habitats once the situation became more stable. In fact, the government's stand was towards discouraging further migration and emphasising on repatriation and unto this it was more a process of restoring the immigrants' properties on their return.[6]

The Inter Dominion Conference of April 1948 between India and Pakistan was primarily held with this purpose. It aimed at removing the fear psychosis of the minorities by setting up Minorities' Boards in both East and West Bengal. Although this had some positive impact of considerably reducing both the pace and volume of exodus initially, it failed to achieve any long term gains as West Bengal was soon flooded with fresh and a more massive surge of influx after the communal riots of 1950. And yet, the Delhi Pact which was also signed around the same time, between the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan, continued to insist on repatriation and worked towards amelioration of perceived insecurities of the minority on both sides. Mohanlal Saxena, Minister for Rehabilitation of Government of India declared unequivocally at a meeting held in Calcutta on March 1 and 2 that "the people who had come recently from Pakistan and who might come later on were Pakistan Nationals and the Government of India intended to hold them temporarily till the situation improved."[7]

Existing scholarship stands immensely critical of the way in which the central government handled the problem of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal. Nehru, as the Prime Minister

[5] P.N. Luthra, *Rehabilitation,* GOI Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi, 1972, p.15
[6] *Millions Came From Eastern Pakistan, They Live Again*, Director of Publicity, Govt. of West Bengal, 1953, p. 17
[7] *Shyama Prasad Mookerjee Papers*, Instalments II-IV, Subject file: 159

of India has been criticised for his 'indifference' towards Bengal in comparison to his prompt action for Punjab. Joya Chatterji points out that Nehru was convinced that conditions in East Bengal did not constitute a grave and permanent danger to its Hindu minorities. He regarded their flight as a product of their largely imaginary fears and baseless rumours and not the consequence of palpable threats to Hindu life and property. Hence he refused to recognise the continuous influx into West Bengal as a permanent feature and deluded himself into believing that the process could be halted or even reversed through joint efforts with Pakistan.[8] Prafulla K. Chakrabarti has also criticised Nehru for his prolonged intransigence in the matter. He says that Nehru should have easily foreseen that what had happened in Punjab would sooner or later happen in Bengal but in the interest of keeping Kashmir as part of the Indian Union and to establish before the world that minorities were safe in India, he prevented a systematic exchange of population and property as was done in case of Punjab.[9] Although, if one may avoid being too sceptical of Nehru, his purpose seemed well-intended as he wanted to prevent another colossal transfer of population and bring on its added disruptions.[10] But, it only led to a cataclysmic delay in effectively addressing the refugee problem in Bengal. Instead, every effort was made to check migration – from extending psychological assurances through the Delhi Pact or introduction of a system of institutional checks for crossing borders. Introduction of the passport system in 1952 and in 1956 of migration certificates to only those who could prove a direct threat to their lives or to the honour of their women folk in East Bengal were largely measures intended to restrict the numbers of refugees entering the Indian side.

If the central government had been in a 'denial' mode, the very own state government was quite apprehensive of an overwhelming influx of refugees. The Government of West Bengal complained of how it only compounded the difficulties of a geographically and economically truncated state reeking under an ever increasing population and the consequent overcrowding of cities as well as excruciating pressure on the state's resources.[11] Samir Kumar Das points

[8] Joya Chatterji, 'Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-50' in Suvir Kaul(ed.) *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, Permanent Black: Delhi, 2001, p. 75

[9] Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal,* Lumiere Books: Calcutta, 1990, pp. 28- 32

[10] Nehru's address in the Parliament on February 23, 1950 after the communal riots in East Pakistan has been discussed in chapter 3.

[11]The Finance Minister of West Bengal, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, explained in his first Annual Budget speech: "With the limitations imposed on us to render all the relief they may need or all that we may wish to render them in the new predicament… Since the influx from East Bengal is most swelling the population in the towns,

out that the government's policies towards the welfare of refugees were solely guided by economic considerations.[12] However, the East Bengali refugee was not only considered an impediment to West Bengal's prosperity but also came to be looked upon as an intrinsic 'law-and-order problem' with the capacity to endanger the current status-quo. Joya Chatterji says that Bidhan Chandra Roy was particularly suspicious of the refugee as he looked upon them as combustible material with the potential to breed political opposition.[13] Hence, the state government insisted on the idea of 'dispersing' refugees outside West Bengal stating dearth of adequate land for their rehabilitation.

Concerted programmes to 'distribute' refugees outside West Bengal were undertaken at various points of time. Apart from seeking vacant lands from the neighbouring states of Bihar, Assam and Orissa, the Indian government also identified land colonization schemes in Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Dandakaranya in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh as potential regions for rehabilitation of East Bengali refugees. But then the question was which refugees would face dispersal? Renuka Ray, West Bengal's Minister in charge of Relief and Rehabilitation made it quite clear in 1955, "We have reached a saturation point and whereas we must satisfactorily help to settle those who have come earlier, it is beyond the capacity and powers of this state to provide land for cultivators and even homesteads in urban areas for those who are new comers and will still continue to come."[14] Invariably, it was the most vulnerable and dependent section of refugees, under the pretext of having arrived late who faced the brunt of dispersal. Large numbers of Namasudras belonged to this section.

Vagaries of Rehabilitation and the Downtrodden Refugee

With the exodus of 1950, Namasudras who had continued to stay in East Bengal after partition started migrating in large numbers in intermittent phases over a prolonged period of

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West Bengal's problems of food supply, housing, education and public health as also finding employment for large blocks of floating population are rapidly growing in magnitude and complexity." *West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings*, February 17, 1948, pp.16-20

[12] Samir Kumar Das, 'Refugee Crisis: Responses of the Government of West Bengal' in Pradip Kumar Bose (ed.), *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Processes and Contested Identities*, Calcutta Research group: Calcutta, 2000

[13] Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, pp. 130-131. Chatterji in fact quotes from a letter that Roy had written to Nehru, "…in this province…we have…refugees coming in a state of mental excitement which enables the careerist politician to get hold of them and utilise them for various types of propaganda against the Government and the Congress."

[14] *Renuka Ray papers*, Subject File No: 5, 1960, NMML

time, for reasons of communal persecution, deterioration of relations between both countries over Hyderabad or Kashmir, passport 'scare', and worsening economic conditions (*see Table 2*). Ross Mallick points out that the near total departure of the upper caste Hindu, landed elite and urban middle classes meant that communal antagonism had to be directed against the Hindu untouchables who remained.[15] Mostly unfamiliar with West Bengal, Namasudras neither had resources nor useful caste connections to help them sustain themselves and hence they obviously became dependent on the state and had to take shelter in government camps started at various places. In the month of March alone in 1950, the number of admissions in camps had been as high as 75,596 and between January 1951 and April 1952, the total number of admissions in camps were 85,457.[16] Since rehabilitation arrangements had been rudimentary in West Bengal and the system was only evolving as and when the immigrations occurred, construction of various types of transit camps also happened simultaneously. The much heard of Cooper's Camp at Ranaghat in Nadia, which went on to become one of the largest relief camps in West Bengal was established almost concurrent with the influx of 1950. By 1958, there were about 8 lakh refugees in some 150 camps and homes in West Bengal.[17]

Table No 4.1.

Refugee Influx from East Pakistan, 1946-1970

(figures in lakhs)

Year of influx	Reasons	Total	In West Bengal	In other states
1946	Noakhali riots	0.19	0.14	0.05
1947	Partition	3.44	2.58	0.86
1948	Police action in Hyderabad	7.86	5.90	1.96
1949	Communal riots in Khulna and Barisal	2.13	1.82	0.31
1950	Same	15.75	11.82	3.93
1951	Agitation over Kashmir	1.87	1.40	0.47
1952	Worsening of economic conditions; persecution of minorities and; passport scare	2.27	1.52	0.75
1953	----------	0.76	0.61	0.15
1954	----------	1.18	1.04	0.14

[15] Ross Mallick, 'Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (February, 1999), pp. 105

[16] *Millions Came From Eastern Pakistan.* See Appendix I.

[17] Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'The East Bengali Refugees, A Lesson In Survival', in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.) *Calcutta, The Living City*, Vol. II: The Present and Future, OUP, 1990, p. 75

1955	Unrest over declaration of urdu as *lingua franca*	2.40	2.12	0.28
1956	Adoption of Islamic Constitution by Pakistan	3.20	2.47	0.73
1957	Period of lull	0.11	0.09	0.02
1958 (upto March)	Same	0.01	0.01	----
1959 (April onwards)	Same	0.10	0.09	0.01
1960	Same	0.10	0.09	0.01
1961	Same	0.11	0.10	0.01
1962	Same	0.14	0.13	0.01
1963	Same	0.16	0.14	0.02
1964	Riots over Hazrat Bal incident	6.93	4.19	2.74
1965	Period of lull	1.08	0.81	0.27
1966	Same	0.08	0.04	0.04
1967	Same	0.24	0.05	0.19
1968	Same	0.12	0.04	0.08
1969	Same	0.10	0.04	0.06
1970	Economic distress and coming elections	2.50	2.32	0.18
	Total	**52.83**	**39.56**	**13.27**

***Source**: P.N. Luthra, Rehabilitation, Publications Division: New Delhi, 1972, pp. 18-19*

The border districts of Nadia and 24 Parganas in fact saw highest concentration of SC migrants for obvious reasons.[18] They arrived in huge numbers, completely shattered and denuded, petrified and exhausted and crowded at every threshold, whether it was at the border check posts of Banpur (Nadia) or Bongaon (24 Parganas) or the Sealdah railway junction. For days they lived on railway platforms, huddled together in miserable conditions, surviving on minimal means given by government or private charity, or dying of dysentery, cholera or chicken pox, in anticipation of the next stage of governmental aid. The procedure of availing relief was a long drawn one and quite draining. At interception centres along the border the incoming refugees were interrogated and upon satisfactorily establishing their claim as fresh arrivals, were issued slips known as border slips which qualified them as refugees. Since most Namasudra migrants were dependent on state for both food and shelter, they received a 'special class' of interception slip which entitled them to admission in camps. From there, they were sent to the nearest reception centres, in most cases Sealdah, where they

[18] Both these districts were contiguous with East Pakistan. Hence it was comparatively easier for the lower caste people such as Namasudras, Paundra Kshatriyas and Jalia Kaibarttas living on the East Pakistan side to migrate to these districts. In 1951, there were 20,944 migrant families in 24 parganas and 28,707 in Nadia. See *Report on the Sample Survey for Estimating the Socio-Economic Characteristics of displaced persons from Eastern Pakistan to the State of West Bengal*, State Statistical Bureau, Govt. of West Bengal, 1951, p. 18

were further checked before being herded in government transport to the nearest available transit camp. Here they were once again questioned, classified as per their occupation and provided with identity cards which would entitle them to live in the camps and draw their maintenance grants consisting of food grains and cash. After days of waiting, they would be sent to regular camps pending final rehabilitation. Unattached women, old and disabled men and dependent children were separated and sent to PL or Permanent Liability Camps.[19] The entire routine was not only long but fairly arduous, especially for those who already had a harrowing experience facing displacement. Also, repeated scrutiny by the host country at every check-point, right from entering the border until reaching the relief camp, to ascertain the genuine-ness of those arriving had been emotionally quite exasperating. After introduction of the Passport system since the refugees had to obtain Migration Certificate from the Deputy High Commissioner for India at Dacca, the issue of border slips at the interception centres had to be discontinued.[20]

Table 4.2.

Migrant families in districts of West Bengal by community

Serial No	District	Hindus other than Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribe	Others	Total
1.	Burdwan	20,740	3,785		91	24,616
2.	Birbhum	1,833	776	23	23	2,655
3.	Bankura	1,899	99	296	..	2,294
4.	Midnapore	5,690	325	..	43	6,058
5.	Howrah	15,610	1,164	..	53	16,827
6.	Hoogly	10,652	1,463	..	..	12,115
7.	**24 Parganas**	79,362	**20,944**	94	164	1,00,564
8.	Calcutta	73,927	1,681	25	445	76,078
9.	**Nadia**	55,591	**28,707**	260	355	84,913
10.	Murshidabad	8,053	5,746	625	..	14,424
11.	West Dinajpur	14,567	6,592	6,146	..	27,305

[19] *Millions Came From Eastern Pakistan,* p. 20
[20] Ibid, p. 21

12.	Malda	5,660	5,997	3,072	147	14,876
13.	Jalpaiguri	14,061	6,397	23	115	20,596
14.	Darjeeling	2,037	1,388	..	..	3,425
15.	Cooch Behar	18,285	4,076	118	47	22,526
Total		**3,27,967**	**89,140**	**10,682**	**1,483**	**4,29,272**
Percentage		**76.4**	**20.8**	**2.5**	**0.3**	**100**

Source*: Report on the Sample Survey for Estimating the Socio-Economic Characteristics of displaced persons migrating from Eastern Pakistan to the State of West Bengal, State Statistical Bureau, Govt. of West Bengal, 1951*

Life inside a relief camp was no less an ordeal. Prafulla K. Chakrabarti provides a vivid description of camp life where men and women were herded together like animals and lived on meagre pittances called doles.[21] Government run relief and transit camps were set up in different parts of West Bengal as intermediary arrangements in order to extend immediate help to the refugees before they could be rehabilitated. The latter were directly not sent for rehabilitation mainly due to the magnitude of the influx and also because they were often supposed to be sent to other parts of the country for which instant preparation was not possible such as for their travel, etc. Although basic necessities were catered for but with extreme deficiencies- the inmates complained of extreme scarcity of drinking water, lack of adequate sanitary arrangements and proper medical facilities. There was severe lack of privacy in the camps owing to overcrowding and insufficient space. An ex-inmate of the Ranaghat Cooper's Camp narrated her experience – "Each family marked its occupied area with pebbles, stones and tit-bits and sometimes did not even have a sleeping space for the members of the refugee family. So far as the tent was concerned, each refugee family comprising four members got one tent, and a bigger family (with more than four members) got two tents to live in. Under such circumstances, there was absolutely no question of any privacy."[22] Even deaths were dehumanising. When people died of epidemics which were quite common in the camps, there were no means to dispose of the dead. They were either

[21] Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, pp. 156- 158

[22] Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Living another Life: Un-homed in the Camps' in Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ishita Dey, *Citizens, Non-Citizens and in the Camp Lives*, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group: Kolkata, 2009, pp. 16-17. The excerpt has been quoted from an interview done by Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury.

thrown into the nearby jungles for the hyenas to feed or were stacked in piles to be cremated collectively as and when the government would arrange.[23]

Often, the entire experience would be so demoralising that it would compel the refugees to undertake return journeys to their native homes in East Pakistan. Death of their loved ones, children and the older members due to disease, etc. inside the camps often led many to go back. As a report of a D.I.O. of Nadia dated November 8, 1950 stated of such occurrences in the Dhubulia camp:

> In course of my visit to Dhubulia transit camp I have found that the refugees of fishermen class and other lower classes have been going away to Pakistan in large numbers every day. They are mostly of Barisal District. They stated that they had already lost many of their children and old members in this camp due to disease, etc. Some of them who had gone away already are writing letters to them inviting them to come back as the conditions have improved much there. They also stated that the Muslim refugees who had been to their villages from West Bengal had also come back to West Bengal and that this year the Durga Puja was performed by the Hindus of Madhabpara, Rahamatpur and other villages of Barisal with the protection of police who helped them much. They also stated that many other families of this camp had got ready for going back to Pakistan where the Pakistan Government were making good arrangements for their house building and other necessaries of life.[24]

Such incidents of 'return' of the refugees mostly occurred in the initial period when it was hoped that the inter-dominion understandings would reap positive results.

Rehabilitation of these, denuded section of refugees, given their uninterrupted osmosis into the Indian side, was a sure challenge for the government. Nevertheless, refugees entering West Bengal were classified into two categories, the 'old migrants' and the 'new migrants', depending on the date of their arrival. The 'old migrants' were those who had migrated before April 1958 and were entitled to regular relief and rehabilitation assistance while the 'new migrants' were those who had migrated between January 1964 and March 1971 but who

[23] Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*, p. 159
[24] File no: 1809-48 (Nadia) Subject: Reports on the activities of Refugees in Nadia district, Office of Deputy Inspector General of Police, Intelligence Branch, p. 156

could avail rehabilitation benefits only outside West Bengal. Unfortunately, those who migrated in the intervening period, i.e. between April 1958 and January 1964, could not get any benefit as the government had suspended official procedures in order to discourage 'irrational' migrations for cash doles (*see Table 3*). An unofficial estimate of around 2.5 lakh people had entered West Bengal during that time.[25]

Table No 4.3.

Chronological Statement of influx of migrants from East Pakistan into India

(figures in lakhs)

Old Migrants

Year of Influx	In West Bengal	In Other States	Total
1946-52	25.18	5.73	30.91
1953	0.61	0.15	0.76
1954	1.04	0.17	1.21
1955	2.12	0.29	2.41
1956	2.47	3.34	5.81
1957	0.04	0.02	0.06
1958 (upto March 31)	0.01	0.00	0.01
Total	**31.47**	**9.70**	**41.17**

Migrants not eligible for Relief and Rehabilitation benefits

Year of Influx	In West Bengal	In Other States	Total
1958 (from April 1)	0.04	0.00	0.04
1959	0.05	0.01	0.06
1960	0.09	0.01	0.10
1961	0.10	0.01	0.11
1962	0.13	0.01	0.14
1963 (upto December)	0.14	0.02	0.16
Total	**0.55**	**0.06**	**0.61**

New Migrants

Year of Influx	In West Bengal	In Other States	Total
1964 (from January 1)	4.19	2.74	6.93
1965	0.81	0.26	1.07
1966	0.04	0.04	0.08
1967	0.05	0.19	0.24
1968	0.04	0.08	0.12

[25] Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'The East Bengali Refugees, A Lesson In Survival', p. 71

1969	0.04	0.06	0.10
1970 (upto March 25)	0.07	0.02	0.09
Total	**7.57**	**3.57**	**11.14**

***Source**: Report of the Working Group on Residual Problem of Rehabilitation in West Bengal, Ministry of Supply and Rehabilitation, March 1976, Appendix III*

Since most Namasudras had been migrating late, it was their lot which had to endure any adverse changes made in the government's rehabilitation policy. Taking the influx as a whole, about 41% of the refugees were agriculturalists - their percentage of influx was low at 15% in the pre-1949 period which went up to 40% in the 1950s and 70% in the 1960s. As refugee agriculturalists, Namasudras who were offered rehabilitation in West Bengal were entitled to assistances such as (a) provision of agricultural land in Government sponsored colonies or financial assistance for the purchase of agricultural land up to Rs. 900 for 3 acres; (b) loan for purchase of agricultural implements, bullocks, fertilisers, etc. at Rs. 600 per family, which was subsequently raised to Rs. 1,315 per family in 1964; (c) loan for reclamation of land at Rs. 50 per acre for 3 acres and; (d) maintenance allowance at Rs. 50 per month for 9 months.[26] As it turned out, the government schemes involving allotment of lands were more successful in cases where the refugees were themselves involved in selecting sites of their resettlement.[27]

A large number of Namasudra families were also settled outside West Bengal right in the beginning as the state government had been fretting over paucity of adequate resources. In 1953-54, around four hundred agriculturalist families were purported to be settled in the Middle Andaman Islands under a land colonization scheme of the central government, while in the Nainital district of Uttarakhand, around five hundred such families were settled for growing jute in the region between 1951 and 1952.[28]However, the settlements in Orissa and Bihar saw mass scale desertions. In view of a growing antipathy towards rehabilitation outside West Bengal, a Committee of Ministers in 1954 examined the possibilities of resettling the deserted refugee families as well as other camp refugees within the state.[29] As agriculturalists therefore, they were proposed to be included in the huge land reclamation

[26] P.N. Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, pp.22-23
[27] *Renuka Ray Papers*, Subject File no. 5, 1960, Correspondence with Morarji Desai, Finance Minister, Regarding Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal
[28] *Millions Came From Eastern Pakistan*, p. 34
[29] *Rehabilitation of Camp Refugees*, Statement issued by Dr. B.C. Roy, Chief Minister, West Bengal on October 13, 1958, p.1

schemes at Bagjola and Sonarpur which were expected to yield 30,000 to 35,000 acres of land and the Herobhanga scheme in Sunderbans, which would be eventually utilized for rehabilitation of these refugees.

Reclamation of the low lying, water logged lands of the Bagjola area through excavation of the Bagjola canal was part of a larger project of the Bagjola-Sonarpur-Arapanch Scheme that was initiated by the state government. The labour involved in it rested with the refugees living in the Bagjola group of camps spread over Bagjola, Gurui, Jatragachi, Jyangra and Krishnapur areas covering around 74.50 acres of land, flanking the highway approaching the Dumdum airport. The Bagjola group of camps started as work site camps in 1954-56 with an understanding that eventually these refugees would be settled on the reclaimed lands.[30] The scheme ultimately failed to materialize in face of a conflict of interest with the local people who put up active resistance. Both Sonarpur and Bagjola Schemes purported to settle around 10,000 agriculturalist families residing in the government camps, eventually, could settle only 400 of them. Reclamation of lands in the marshy Sunderbans also proved difficult. The saline textured soil was hardly amenable to a profitable cultivation of crops and hence after reclamation, embankments had to be raised on the lands in order to drain out the soil's salinity which of course was a time consuming process. Also, large scale deforestation of the area was not recommended as it would affect the Calcutta Port as well as disturb the region's ecology.[31] It is interesting to note that in all these ventures of retrieving waste lands or increasing productivity or colonization of difficult terrain, whether inside West Bengal or in other parts of the country, the governments were primarily stimulated with an economic motive of utilizing manpower and cheap labour of the refugees in developing an otherwise backward area. In other words, refugee rehabilitation was not simply governed by the principles of relief, support, or assistance but by the development logic of the state.[32]

The failed strategies of reclaiming enough cultivable lands within West Bengal ultimately allowed the state government to convince the Centre to devise an effective alternative program towards rehabilitating the agriculturalist *camp* refugees outside West Bengal. In early 1956, the decision of offering rehabilitation only outside West Bengal was endorsed at a

[30] *Report on Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons From East Pakistan Living at Bagjola Group of Ex-Camp Sites in West Bengal*, Committee of Review of Rehabilitation Work in West Bengal, Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, 1970 pp. 7-8
[31] *Rehabilitation of Camp Refugees*, p. 6
[32] Pradip Kumar Bose, 'Refugee, Memory and the State: A Review of Research in Refugee Studies', *Refugee Watch*, 36, December 2010, p.4

conference of the Rehabilitation Ministers, which duly appointed a high level committee to look into the prospects of land colonization.[33] In view of this, a mega project of integrated development was conceived and planned under the supervision of S.V. Ramamurthy, who later became the first Chairman of the Dandakaranya Development Authority in 1958. The Dandakaranya project was based on a territorial expanse of 30,092 sq. miles which included the Koraput and Kalahandi districts of Orissa and the district of Bastar in Madhya Pradesh. The project was primarily conceived to resettle the vast mass of refugee agriculturalists from East Bengal owing to the availability of large tracts of virgin lands and low population density of the area.

The general pattern of assistance to the agriculturalists was not much different from that adopted elsewhere in rehabilitation schemes- a house plot of 800 sq. yards along with a kitchen garden measuring a third of an acre and 6.7 acres of cultivable land along with a loan ceiling of 2,850 per family (not more than 1,700 for house building, 850 for agricultural purposes and 300 for setting up some additional source of income). Four resettlement zones had been earmarked at Umerkote and Malkangiri in Koraput district and at Paralkote and Kondagaon in Bastar district. By the end of 1965, nearly 12,000 refugee families were sent to Dandakaranya out of which 10,118 were settled in 183 villages which had been made functional. As many as 9,865 families of agriculturalists were resettled.[34] Inevitably most of them were Namasudras. In earlier occasions too, Namasudras had been selectively targeted for purposes of agricultural colonization of the Andaman Islands[35] and the Himalayan foothills of Uttar Pradesh. But Dandakaranya was a different case. Despite huge government expenditure of about Rs. 53.70 crores, the project was rather hastily conceived and inherently flawed given the region's extreme backwardness and inaccessibility, unproductive terrain and a hostile tribal neighbourhood. Also, while Dandakaranya was rich in mineral and forest resources, it was definitely not fertile for agricultural purposes, especially paddy, which was a staple crop of the East Bengali agriculturalists. It became a cardinal reason of their distress, a cumulative result of which was large scale desertions.[36]

[33] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, January 29, 1956
[34] U. Bhaskar Rao, *The Story of Rehabilitation*, Dept. of Rehabilitation, Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, Govt. of India, Publications Division, 1967
[35] Uditi Sen, 'Dissident Memories: Exploring Bengali Refugee Narratives in the Andaman Islands', in Panikos Panayi and Pippa Virdee (eds.) *Refugee and the End of Empire: Imperial Collapse and Forced Migration in the Twentieth Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 219-244.
[36] In 1965, 1,040 families left and the following year another 862 families. Between 1966 and 1972 there were 1600, and between 1972 and 1978 another 10,923 families deserted the settlement. The desertions reached a peak with coming of a Left government in power in 1977 as the refugees believed that the new government

Caste Quotient and Movements for Refugee 'Rights'

The state of Scheduled Caste politics in West Bengal, in the aftermath of a partition generated demographic reshuffle, had been in sheer doldrums. The Ambedkarite, Scheduled Castes Federation party was nearly on the verge of extinction except its rather passive existence in pockets like Kharagpur in Midnapore and Murshidabad, claiming a membership of 200 each respectively.[37] Surprisingly the party had hardly taken any initiative for the low caste refugees who were migrating in miserable conditions. Partition of the state in 1947 in fact turned out to be a watershed moment for the prospect of Scheduled Caste politics in West Bengal as the politically vociferous Namasudras who once stood at its vanguard were left in quandary over pursuing their caste rights vis-à-vis refugee rights.

At the time of partition, Jogendranath Mandal, the Namasudra leader who had wholeheartedly opposed the territorial division of Bengal, chose to stay in Pakistan and joined the first cabinet after independence, as Minister of Law and Labour of the Pakistan government. In the new nation, Mandal had actively engaged with the fundamental Scheduled Caste cause as well as encouraged camaraderie and cooperation with the Muslim majority and other sections of the Hindu minority. He, in fact, not only worked towards building a united front for all the Scheduled Castes of East Bengal through advocating a union of the Scheduled Caste members of the Congress Party as well as the Scheduled Castes Federation in order to form a stronger pressure group but, also sent multiple memoranda to the Pakistan government for inclusion of SC members in its cabinet. His letter of resignation indicated his persistent endeavours in this direction and also revealed his eventual disappointment with the government.[38] After partition, when most Hindu elites and middle classes of East Bengal had migrated to the Indian side, the remaining ordinary sections of the minority population including Namasudras were increasingly victimised on every pretext.

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would be sympathetic to their grievances. See Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, 'Divided Landscapes, fragmented identities: East Bengal refugees and their rehabilitation in India, 1947-79', in *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, Routledge: London and New York, 2000, p. 157

[37] File no. 1052/50, Political Organisations in West Bengal with their officials and Committee members, Office of Deputy Inspector General of Police, Intelligence Branch

[38] Mandal's decision to join Pakistan government and his eventual disillusionment there has been discussed at length in Chapter 3.

Finally the riots of 1950 saw a massive exodus of Namasudras and this loss of their territorial anchorage perhaps impacted on their caste consciousness. However, the Namasudra refugees were hardly seen allying with the Hindu Right Wing.

As displacement became the common cry of the millions who were forced to leave behind their *bhite bari* (home and hearth) and seek asylum in *ochena poribesh* (unfamiliar milieu) and were also, subjected to the vagaries of a rehabilitation system, a new discourse of 'refugee rights' soon grew powerful that encompassed both the middle class refugees and the downtrodden ones in distinctive ways. Large sections of Namasudra peasants who had taken shelter in government camps took to the streets and actively participated in all public meetings and agitations demanding their rehabilitation. Nevertheless, the rising refugee politics of the period despite showing assimilative tendencies was far from being a homogenous movement. For, there were stratified concerns along lines of societal distinction though they were not obviously identifiable.

Hiranmoy Bandopadhay who was the Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner identified three distinct categories of refugees who arrived in West Bengal. First, there were those who were rich and energetic and did not take any kind of governmental help but used their own resources to resettle. Second, there were those who lacked resources but not the will power. These refugees refused to go to government camps and instead occupied abandoned houses or fallow lands and earned their own living. And third were those refugees who neither had the resources nor will power and were obliged to seek shelter in government camps.[39] The idiom of differentiation in Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay's classification of refugees has led to a subsequent glorification of the 'self-help' group which apparently relied on their own initiatives to reconstruct their lives after migration against a 'dependent' category of refugees living off government charity. Within such a discourse, those seeking shelter in government camps invariably appear as passive victims of not only partition but also the regime of rehabilitation. The self-help group, which was actually not so self-sufficient, was composed of the middle class refugees, often in possession of the social advantages that enabled them to pressurize or influence the government, which the under-class refugees could not.[40]

[39] Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay, *Udvastu*, Calcutta, 1990, p.31

[40] Uditi Sen has discussed it at length in her article on the genesis of the Bijaygarh refugee colony which was composed of and founded by the middle class squatters – 'The history of Jadavpur Refugee camp and its eventual transformation into Bijaygarh colony is characterised by constant attempts by the refugees to obtain government aid or legal recognition. The reminiscences of the residents suggest that far from being marginal to

In fact, the Namasudra refugees living in the government camps showed nuanced forms of resistance, quite characteristic of the 'weapons of the weak'[41] against the discrepancies of the system. They asserted their presence through making genuine demands, resisting and even rebelling in whatever way they could, to defy any passive submission to a discourse of victimhood, whether it was against the deficits of relief or against any untoward policy that they thought would adversely impact them. Their massive numbers and ghettoised presence in government shelters made them potential political constituency to various political parties, especially to the rising tide of Leftists viz. the Communists and the Socialists striving to build a strong opposition against the ruling Congress party at that time. The Communist Party of India led United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) and the Praja Socialist Party led *Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan* (SBBS) actively engaged in mobilising the camp residents for several refugee agitations. Notwithstanding, it would be incorrect to assume that the Namasudras completely identified with the Leftists. Given their exigency, they seemed to ally with different political forces with the purpose of negotiating their state of affairs for a better deal.

More often, activism in camps would begin with the inmates agitating and raising demands against deficiencies of relief supply or uninhabitable conditions of living. The Namasudra residents of the Pyradanga camp in Nadia along with their *Kapali* co-inmates (another backward caste) staged a hunger strike on July 8, 1950 against non-supply of cash doles and loans for cultivation and building of houses. They also protested against an alleged transfer of

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the political and bureaucratic order of West Bengal, it was their familiarity with the 'system' which enabled the founders of Bijaygarh to give permanence to an illegal settlement. The quest for new roots in an alien milieu was often aided by old ties of caste, class and locality. The affinity born of a shared past of living in the same district in East Bengal, of belonging to particular educational institutions, political parties or cultural movements, provided not only the building blocks of new communities or associations, but also markers for identifying potential sympathisers within the government and the bureaucracy.' See Uditi Sen, 'Building Bijaygarh: A Microhistory of Refugee Squatting in Calcutta' in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandopadhyay (eds.) *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, Social Science Press: New Delhi, 2015, pp. 407- 433. Also, in her book, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018.

[41] James Scott's seminal work on 'everyday forms of peasant resistance', based on his field research in a Malaysian village where in he seeks to highlight the ordinary weapons of the subordinate classes in their struggles against the dominant groups- 'In the Third World it is rare for peasants to risk an outright confrontation with the authorities over taxes, cropping patterns, development policies, or onerous new laws' instead they are likely to nibble away at such policies by noncompliance, foot dragging, deception. In place of a land invasion, they prefer piecemeal squatting; in place of open mutiny, they prefer desertion; in place of attacks on public or private grain stores, they prefer pilfering. When such stratagems are abandoned in favor of more quixotic action, it is usually a sign of great desperation.' See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University press: New Haven and London, 1985

available local lands in Gopalpur to middle class refugees that were originally meant for them.[42] On another occasion, the refugees of the Nasra camp in Ranaghat protested against the Camp Superintendent for not paying their legitimate wages against the work extracted from them.[43] Often there were conflicts with the camp authorities over allegations of maladministration and corruption, especially in bigger camps like Cooper's and, in Dhubulia, it even went violent where one of the inmates, Anukul Brahma, got killed and several others injured.[44] This apart, the refugees also protested and staged *hartals* when they were forced to take rehabilitation outside West Bengal and were threatened with stoppage of their doles and other relief facilities.[45]

Partition of Bengal had happened with an overwhelming support from Namasudra leaders who upheld the Congress decision in spite of its consequences being detrimental to their community which lost its territory to Pakistan.[46] Pramatha Ranjan Thakur who had migrated to West Bengal in 1948 remained a Congress supporter till 1964. He had won twice as a Congress nominee in the Assembly elections from Haringhata reserved constituency in 1957 and from Hanskhali reserved constituency in 1962, and also held tenure as Minister of State for Tribal Development. Between Chandpara and Gobardanga railway stations in 24 Parganas (north) Thakur had recreated the *Orakandi* milieu establishing the Thakurnagar colony where he had offered shelter to a large number of his *Matua* followers. However, as a Congress leader he had been sceptical of the CPI and criticised its attempts to 'distract' refugees from taking up rehabilitation offers outside West Bengal and had in fact encouraged many Namasudra families to settle in Andaman, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa as well as Dandakaranya.[47]

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[42] Report of O.C., Ranaghat Police Station, dated July 12, 1950, in File No: 1809-48 (Nadia), Subject: Reports on the activities of Refugees in Nadia district, Office of Deputy Inspector General of Police, Intelligence Branch, p.80

[43] Report of O.C., Ranaghat Police Station dated January 6, 1951, ibid, p.221

[44] Abstract dated October 7, 1950, ibid, p.225

[45] The Sub-Inspector of Police of the Cooper's Camp, Ranaghat reported on September 10, 1950 that there was great tension in the camp over the despatch of refugees to Amardah Camp in Orissa. Some of the refugees when prayed for time were rudely refused by the administrator who even abused them and ordered a subordinate to throw the belongings of the said refugees out of the camp. Some of the refugees were also reported to have been roughly handled and assaulted. The situation was brought under control with police intervention. See Abstract dated September 23, 1950, ibid, p.217. Similar incident was also reported from the Dhubulia Camp of suspension of doles to refugees when some of them refused to leave the camp for rehabilitation outside West Bengal unless informed of their destination. See Report regarding the situation at Dhubulia Refugee Camp, submitted by an IB officer dated December 14, 1950, Ibid, p.165

[46] For details on partition debate between Namasudra leaders refer to discussion in Chapter 3.

[47] Kapil Krishna Biswas, 'Bangali Udbastuder Punarbasan e Pramatha Ranjan Thakur er Bhumika' (Role of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur in the Rehabilitation of Bengali Refugees), in *Nikhil Bharat* (New India), Special Issue, Bamangachhi, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal, January, 2010, pp. 20-22

Not until the mid-1950s the government hardly seemed to have any concrete plan of rehabilitation for the refugees of East Bengal as the union government was under the impression that the migrants would eventually go back. Hence, it was only natural that the refugees grew frustrated overtime. The rise of Left movement in West Bengal is often interpreted as a catharsis of the refugees' disgruntlement. Its representative organisation for refugee 'rights', the UCRC, had successfully led the metropolitan squatters' movement against eviction which caused a subsequent regularisation of as many as 133 colonies in 1958 with more to follow.[48] However, as Prafulla K. Chakrabarti observes, a similar vigour and concern was lacking in case of the camp movements as 'the petty bourgeois squatters who had very little relationship with the lowly Namasudra peasants before migration felt no real concern for the fate of these agriculturalists.'[49] There were hardly any united movements of the refugees as such and the illiterate and poor Namasudras stranded in government camps were mostly left to fend for themselves.

Tomare bolbo ki Prodhamantri Mohashoy
Bastuharar dukkho sara tomar pokkhe holo daye
Camp e theke mathe ghate aar koto din jibon kate?
Holam bastuhara lokkhichhara kar kolom er ek khonchaye
Chai na mora dalankotha. Chai mota bhaat aar kapor mota
Tao Jodi na jutbe tobe moder hobe ki upaye?
Jagannath er bhokto mora rakhbo sunam jagat jora
Tar bidhan e shashaman e bastuhara banchte chaye[50]

(Dear Mr. Prime Minister, what do I tell you?
Resolving us, refugees' plight seems too much task for you.
From staying in camps to living out in the open, how long does one live like thus?
At the stroke of a pen, overnight we became homeless and anchorless,
We do not aspire palatial houses, all we want is basic food and clothes.
If that also is too much of an ask, we wonder what would happen to us.

[48] Prafulla K. Chakrabarti provides a celebratory account of the 'jabardakhal' or the squatters' movement which had emerged largely around the metropolis of Calcutta, mostly comprising the middle class refugees, which in fact stimulated and emboldened a strong Left movement in West Bengal. See Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men*
[49] Ibid, p.179
[50] Nalini Ranjan Mandal, 'Udbastu neta Hemanat Biswas o Bagjolar lodai' (Refugee Leader, Hemanta Biswas and the Bagjola agitation) in *Nikhil Bharat*, Special Issue, Bamangachhi, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal, January, 2010, p. 31. English translation of the Bangla song is mine.

As devotees of Sri Jaganatha, we, as destitute refugees,
Only wish to get to live respectable lives.)

Suren Sarkar's protest song during the Bagjola Camp agitation of 1958-59 consequent to the government's arbitrary decision in 1957 to enforce evacuation of camp refugees for their resettlement in far flung areas outside West Bengal is a compelling depiction of the sheer misery of those refugees. The Bagjola Worksite Camp originally established with the intention of developing a marshy wasteland in the Greater Calcutta region was a laborious affair that entailed unflinching refugee effort in lieu of a promised resettlement there. As it turned out, an eventual betrayal of purpose by the state turned the tables for the labouring refugees who were suddenly asked to vacate the camps and take up rehabilitation in Dandakaranya. As a result, there was a protest in Bagjola on January 11 and 12, 1958 of the camp residents, where a mammoth gathering was organised by the *Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan* that invited participation from the other affected camps.[51]

On March 17, 1958 around five thousand refugees streamed in from the numerous camps of Bagjola, Burdwan, Ghusuri, Howrah and Sonarpur to congregate at Raja Subodh Mullick Square where the SBBS had given a call for *satyagraha* against the government's emphatic pursuit of refugee rehabilitation, albeit *only* the camp ones, outside West Bengal.[52] Around three thousand *satyagrahis* courted arrest on the first day in violation of the prohibitory order of Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code. Jogendranath Mandal along with Pabitra Ray of Praja Socialist Party led a mammoth procession of around twelve thousand refugees from various government camps on the second day where Mandal criticised the myopic vision of the Government of West Bengal which chose to send the refugee agriculturalists outside, who could have otherwise enormously contributed to the state's prosperity.[53] Mandal along with 344 *satygrahis* courted arrest on the second day, which also included eight women participants.[54] The pattern was repeated every day with refugees gushing in from various camps led by their leaders till they were incarcerated. More than 30,000 persons had been arrested during the month long satyagraha.

[51] Kapil Krishna Thakur, 'Udbastu Andolan e Mahapran Jogendranath' (The role of Jogendranath Mandal in Refugee Movement), ibid.
[52] Extract from Special Branch Daily Notes dated March 18, 1958, (No. 1144/58 (3)) , in File no: 96/49, Office of Deputy Inspector General of Police, Intelligence Branch
[53] Report of Refugee Satyagraha dated March 28, 1958 (No. 3380-57), ibid.
[54] *Anandabazar Patrika*, March 19, 1958

Although the movement was organised by PSP led *Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan* with the Left leaning, UCRC joining in April, it was quintessentially an agitation of the downtrodden refugee, representing large numbers of Namasudras who had been languishing in the relief camps and were faced the threat of dispersal. The movement also saw effective leadership from within the community such as Jogendranath Mandal, Hemanta Biswas, Jatin Saha and Apurbalal Majumdar who stood at the vanguard. The middle class squatters seemed largely indifferent as they were content with their own gains, with regularisation of their colonies. Also noticeable was a stark contrast in policy, of a seemingly prejudiced state which on one hand legitimised the unauthorised acquisitions of urban squatters while on the other dictated unwarranted dispersal of camp refugees.[55]

Jogendranath Mandal soon fell out with the SBBS as he grew apprehensive of its latent political agenda. Instead, he took an initiative to establish an exclusive platform for the camp refugees, considering their numerical strength and the fact that most of them were Namasudras. Thus, the *Purba Bharat Bastuhara Samsad* (PBBS) was formed in July 9, 1958. Meanwhile, at a high level conference of the Central and State Ministers held in Calcutta in July, 1958 it was decided that all camps functioning in West Bengal would have to be closed by July 31, 1959. The conference further emphasised upon dispersal of refugees outside West Bengal owing to the state's scanty resources and its expressed inability to absorb not more than 10,000 of the 45,000 families staying in its camps.[56] The PBBS in its meeting held at Cooper's Camp on November 28 and 29 passed emergent resolutions demanding rehabilitation of refugees in the lands lying vacant within the state. The meeting pointed out Rafiuddin Ahmed's statement as Minister for Agriculture made in the State Assembly on March 6, 1956 which estimated around 8 lakh acres of available land in the state.[57] Based on official data the PBBS submitted an exhaustive list of cultivable lands available in the districts of 24 Parganas, Murshidabad and Nadia as memorandum to the Chief Minister in

[55] As a result of the UCRC led middle class, squatter's movement for regularisation of their colonies, government in response, in the report of the Committee of Ministers in 1954 admitted that 'eviction of the squatters from the colonies could not be supported on humanitarian grounds and that it would be inhuman to evict them without providing them with alternative accommodation. It recommended the recognition of the colonies founded on unauthorized occupation of land.' See Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *Marginal Men,* pp. 153-154. This was certainly a contrast from the way the government sought to enforce the 'dispersal' of the camp refugees.

[56] Agitation by the Refugees (File No. 1304/58 P. No. 281-279) in File No. 165 Z/24, Subject: Ambika Chakrabarty, Office of Deputy Inspector General of Police, Intelligence Branch

[57] Resolutions of the Purba Bharat Bastuhara Samsad at Cooper's Camp meeting, accessed from the personal collection of Jagadish Chandra Mandal, p. 2.

January 1959.[58] With an allocation of 3 acres (or 9 bighas) of land for cultivation to each family instead of an unfeasible proposition of 6 acres by the state government, the available land count as per the official estimation could readily rehabilitate 34,700 agriculturalist families inside the state.[59] Even the UCRC had submitted 'an alternative proposal' for rehabilitation of camp refugees within West Bengal in August 1958.[60] An intransigent B.C. Roy government however, turned down all proposals.[61]

From September onwards the processes of evicting refugees out of camps and sending them outside for rehabilitation became more stringent as well as coercive with refugees being served with notices to undertake settlements in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Dandakaranya. This was pursued with simultaneous threats of announcing stoppage of doles and other facilities. The earlier assurances by the Chief Minister given at the time of the camp *satyagraha* of March-April 1958 that 'the refugees in camps would not be sent outside against their wish and that their dole services would not be stopped' seemed to have been invalidated.[62] In retaliation Mandal called for renewal of agitation and joined hands with the SBBS despite his differences. On December 22, 1959 the PBBS and the SBBS staged a combined protest at *Maidan* against the forceful transfer of camp refugees outside West Bengal and suspension of their essential dole services as well as demanding resignation of Meher Chand Khanna, the Union Rehabilitation Minister.[63] Under the Preventive Detention Act of 1950 Mandal was arrested on January 6, 1960.

Mandal's detention boomeranged as it further fuelled agitation of the camp refugees. The Bagjola Camp, which had been an epicentre of all action, staged hunger strikes in early February protesting against the government's obstinate enactment of dispersal, a precedent which soon spread to the other camps. At Baltia in Haroa, around 25 refugees were injured as a result of police *lathi*-charge and tear gas attack when the latter tried to forcibly terminate

[58] The memorandum submitted by the PBBS has been published in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, Vol. 6, Chaturtha Duniya: Kolkata, 2004, pp.70-75. See Appendix II.
[59] Ibid, p. 69
[60] See *An Alternative Proposal: Rehabilitation of Camp Refugees in West Bengal*, Memorandum submitted by the UCRC to Dr. B.C. Roy, Chief Minister of West Bengal on August 11, 1958
[61] See *Rehabilitation of Camp Refugees* for B.C. Roy's response to proposals for rehabilitation of the camp refugee.
[62] Memorandum of demands submitted by the PBBS to B.C. Roy, Chief Minister of West Bengal on 14 June 1961, accessed from the personal collections of Jagadish Chandra Mandal, p. 1
[63] *Lok Sevak*, December 23, 1959.

the hunger strike at the refugee camp.[64] Camp movement seemed to have reached a crescendo by June 1961 when inmates of around twenty two camps came together to stage simultaneous hunger strikes. The police retaliated with violence as it fired upon a protesting congregation at Bagjola Camp on June 26 causing death of four satyagrahis and injuring twenty seven others while at the Cooper's Camp in Ranaghat, seven refugees were injured as per official reports.[65] In both places the police tried to prevent the hunger strike by forcibly sending those sitting on strike to the hospital which of course instigated the refugees. In a resulting fracas between both sides, the police released rounds of tear gas and lathi charged upon the protesters before open firing on them as the infuriated refugees resisted and retaliated through pelting stones, chipped glass pieces or whatever came their way. An indignant mob of around five thousand refugees also took to blockade the Bongaon-Ranaghat railway line near the Cooper's camp to protest against police action. The incident of Bagjola killing generated enough ripples in all political circles as both the left leaning UCRC as well as the Jan Sangh came together to severely criticise the unjustified repression of the refugees' protest. They not only heaped blame on Congress governance but also demanded rehabilitation of the refugees within West Bengal.[66]

In view of increased state repression of the camp refugees' struggles against further dislocation, Jogendranath Mandal as a last resort appealed to the President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad. However, Meher Chand Khanna's response to it as the Union Rehabilitation Minister only revealed the government's intention to pursue its strategy in unambiguous terms.[67]

> …In September, 1960, the proposal of the Chief Minister of West Bengal, was also accepted that the system of voluntary movement of the camp families, which had not worked well in the past, should be given a further trial since, with the reconstitution of the Authority, a favourable climate had been created and a satisfactory response could be expected from the displaced persons. The system of voluntary movement did not, however, produce any result in September or October, 1960, and even after the observation of a "Dandakaranya Week" in November, during which facilities available for resettlement in Dandakaranya were given wide publicity in the camps in

[64] *Lok Sevak*, February 14, 1960
[65] *Jugantar*, June 27, 1961
[66] *Jugantar* June 29, 1961
[67] Meher Chand Khanna's letter to Mandal dated July 7, 1961 (D.O. No. 10(7) – 61/M(R)/589) has been published in Mandal's book, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, Vol. 7, Chaturtha Duniya: Kolkata, 2006, pp. 133-138

> West Bengal to induce the camp families to move, the response was negligible. It was, therefore, decided in December, 1960, in consultation with the Chief Minister of West Bengal, that the voluntary system of movement had failed and that notices should be issued to camp families to move to Dandakaranya, fixing definite dates for such movement. In spite of this, the pace of movement to Dandakaranya did not improve. In February 1961, the Chairman, Dandakaranya Development Authority, wrote to the Chief Minister, West Bengal, expressing concern over the failure of the measures taken for the movement of camp families to Dandakaranya. The Prime Minister also wrote to the Chief Minister on the same subject pointing out that the Government of India had gone ahead with the arrangements for the settlement of camp families at Dandakaranya at considerable cost. He advised that in order to avoid waste of national funds, positive action was necessary to send camp families to Dandakaranya for re-settlement. By March, 1961, the Government of India had sanctioned expensiture to the tune of Rs. 15 crores and had actually spent about Rs. 10 crores on the purchase of machinery, reclamation of land and other developmental activities in Dandakaranya. The movement of camp families from West Bengal to Dandakaranya to occupy the lands prepared for them was, therefore, a matter of the greatest importance.

The Union Government thus seemed more intent on making Dandakaranya a success than being concerned about the refugees' grievances, especially as the project had already expended a lot of public money. Khanna in fact made a counter appeal to the organisations crusading for refugees' rights such as the PBBS and the SBBS to cooperate with the government and advise the refugees of camps to take up settlements in Dandakaranya instead of resorting to resistances.[68] The massive rehabilitation project was after all conceived as a last resort, anointed with a purpose of absorbing the 'excess' refugee population from East Pakistan, which necessarily explains why the government was determined on making it successful. In the months that followed the camp movements continued unabated through the numerous protest gatherings or taking out of long processions from Raja Subodh Mullick Square or staging of simultaneous hunger strikes in various camps. But it could not dampen the official processes of 'squeezing out' the refugees who were ultimately dependent on the government for their daily sustenance. According to Sekhar Bandopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury there had been a sudden withdrawal of camp movement in October 1961, the reason being unknown, but the Bagjola camp residents continue to feel that their leaders had

[68] Ibid.

abandoned them before achieving the goals of the movement.[69] Such an analysis however overlooks the essential point that the decision of ultimately winding up all rehabilitation work was undertaken with announcing dissolution of the said ministry after March 1962. This perhaps acted as a death knell that hardly left any other option for this section of refugees. In any case those who migrated after 1964 were offered rehabilitation only outside West Bengal.

The fact that a large number of Namasudra agriculturalists had to stay in government camps and depend on the state for their daily succour invariably made them more vulnerable to the vagaries of its rehabilitation regime. The official stereotype of the peculiar Bengali refugee as 'a creature apart' who 'showed a reluctance to forgo the advantages of gratuitous relief, a disinclination to embrace the rigorous discipline of an independent existence'[70] was largely built on a superficial observation of those living in the camps. Indeed a partial view that has often resulted in becoming a generic assumption, what it tends to overlook in the process is the indefatigable energy that these refugees showed, whether in enduring repeated dislocations from East Pakistan to the several transit camps, trials of assimilations outside Bengal in unfavourable milieu, contributing to the state's agricultural growth or protesting and agitating for their rights.

Even the state government agreed that the incoming agriculturalist refugees had immensely contributed to cultivation of fallow lands and increased the state's food production capacity.[71] Whereas, outside West Bengal, wherever the Namasudra agriculturalists had been resettled there are evidences to tell of their hard labour and perseverance in building a sustainable environment. Whether it was at Paralkote which was an oasis in an otherwise sterile terrain of Dandakaranya or the Himalayan Terai region in Uttarkhand where 4,000 families had settled or the islands of Betapur and Neil in the Middle Andamans where more than 2000 families had taken upon themselves to clear 10,000 acres of dense forest lands for livelihood purposes, the Namasudras had adjusted, accommodated and even assimilated wherever there were prospects.[72]

[69] Sekhar Bandopadhyay and Anasua Basu Raychaudhury, *In Search of Space: The Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal after Partition*, Research Paper: Policies and Practices, Mahanirban Calcutta Reaserch Group: Kolkata, February 2014, p.12
[70] U. Bhaskar Rao, *The Story of Rehabilitation*
[71] *Renuka Ray Papers*, St. No. 1517 (200)- Pub, Calcutta, November 29, 1956, Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in the Second Five Year Plan Period, p.10
[72] Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, p.150-161

And even in resisting the government's unfavourable decisions, the Namasudra refugees showed significant agency in organising protests that were intrinsic to their cause, which often meant tactfully negotiating with diverse parties to embolden their purpose. In the end, however, their movements mostly failed as they could neither effect any change in policy nor prevent the evictions from camps. The reason being, obviously their social limitations, when held in contrast with the *bhadralok*-based squatter colonies' movements of early 1950s whose illegal occupations in fact rewarded them with regularisations. Indeed, a paradox.

The new social milieu engendered by partition displacement had made it difficult to reproduce the previous caste structures and distances in the refugee camps and colonies due to the unavoidable population mixture that had taken place. But it did not necessarily imply that caste lines had disappeared entirely. Social 'segregation' was practised in nuanced ways in common enclosures and more often, attempts were also made to uphold the respectable sanctity of the newly acquired spaces. Manas Ray's narrative of his own experience of growing up in a refugee colony in Calcutta states that 'the vast majority of those who came were middle-class people with some urban exposure. Those who did not fall in this bracket – fishermen, carpenters, hut-builders, masons, barbers - tended to concentrate in two adjacent wards lying at one end of the locality… In retrospect, it seems amazing how little I knew of that world, how subtle and comprehensive was the process of normalization of divisions.'[73] The 'respectable' middle class refugee had always maintained their ritual distance from the 'non-respectable' category, either marginalised in colonies or left stagnated in camps and forced to disperse to distant lands in the name of being offered the much awaited rehabilitation. Quite understandably therefore there was little interest in showing unison and participation in the movements of the camp refugees. As Uditi Sen points out that the discourse of respectability running through the refugee narratives and the emphasis on culture and education served to naturalise the recreation of caste and class hierarchies of rural East Bengal amongst the refugee population of West Bengal.[74]

Refugee identity therefore, was not very inclusive in terms of its social composition. Lack of social and cultural capital inevitably failed the camp movements as the residents lacked the characteristic respectability namely social antecedents, political connections and white-collar jobs that could facilitate a more advantageous bargain like the *bhadralok*-squatters in and

[73] Manas Ray, Growing Up Refugee, *History Workshop Journal*, 53 (1): 148-79, 2001
[74] Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee*, p.196

around the metropolis. Moreover, the camp refugees were also not too convinced of the upper-caste led refugee organisations reaching out to them. There were occasions when they were anxious of accepting support from the UCRC or the SBBS.[75] While Jogendranath Mandal had a fall out with the SBBS in course of a camp satygraha, the protest movement of the deserters of Bettiah Camp in Bihar in April-May 1958 saw their leader Apurbalal Majumdar become apprehensive of the UCRC's support. As many as 15,000 Namasudra refugees had left Bettiah camp due to irregular disbursement of relief measures, lack of habitable conditions and ill-treatment by the locals in early 1957 to demand rehabilitation inside West Bengal. Despite the movement being launched under the aegis of the UCRC, Majumdar suspected that the Communist Party had larger political designs to use 'their' people for starting Food Movement which he said would dilute and fail the original purpose of their movement.[76] Thus, there hardly seemed to be any semblance of solidarity in the refugee movements beset with reincarnated versions of social hierarchy that focussed more on pursuing respective ends.

A Cautious Resurgence of Representative Politics

Well into the post-partition era, a cautious resurgence of Scheduled Caste politics occurred when Jogendranath Mandal flagged off the West Bengal branch of the Republican Party of India in October 1963, in Calcutta. This had become necessary particularly with the rehabilitation difficulties that the lower castes, Namasudras by and large, had been facing consistently. An enormous number of them had also been sent outside West Bengal for resettlement in other states where they were deprived of their Scheduled Caste status and its concessional benefits as they were not included in the local Scheduled Caste lists of those states. In view of the impending problems Mandal had extensively written to Nehru, the then

[75] Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury highlights the initial distrust of the camp refugees towards the UCRC. To quote one of her interviews with Gauranga Sarkar, an ex-inmate of the Cooper's Camp who later on became a lawyer- "To many of us, who belong to the lower caste community, the UCRC did nothing for the down-trodden castes in the refugee camps at this stage. In fact, initially, the leadership of the UCRC was not whole- heartedly accepted by the camp-dwellers." See Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Living another life', p. 24

[76] The Food Movement in West Bengal was led by the Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee (PIFRC) in 1959 that was initiated by the Leftists and predominantly by the CPI. The organisation was formed mainly to protest against the steep rise in the prices of rice and paddy and the Congress led state government's failure to procure adequate food grains for distribution through the ration shops and also its failure to check the rampant black marketing of the food grains. This was in the background of the Partition of Bengal in 1947 and its consequent increase in population pressure on the state's resources. See Suranjan Das and Premansukumar Bandyopadhyay, *Food Movement of 1959: Documenting a Turning Point in the History of West Bengal*, K.P. Bagchi & Company: Kolkata, 2004

Prime Minister of India as well as to the Chief Ministers of the concerned states arguing that it would seriously disrupt the educational progress of the relocated Namasudras who were already suffering from lack of material resources. A letter addressed to the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, C.B. Gupta, dated July 19, 1962 wherein Mandal requested for inclusion of Namasudras in the list of SCs of Uttar Pradesh:

> In May last I had been to Nainital and Rampur Districts of your state to see the Bengalee refugees settled there. I visited Dineshpur and Sakti Farm and Ratan Farm in Nainital and Swarag Farm (Asokenagar Colony) in Rampur District. A large number of school going refugee students belonging to this Namasudra community and their guardians settled there placed before me the fact that these students are not being treated as belonging to Scheduled Caste, and unless they are recognised as Scheduled Caste and allowed to enjoy the special concession and privileges as enjoyed by the Scheduled Caste students of Uttar Pradesh such as exemption of tuition fees, book grant and Examination fee etc. their education will be stopped.[77]

Mandal's emphasis on appropriate concessional benefits for Namasudras as SCs settled outside West Bengal was in sync with the fundamental Ambedkarite discourse of upholding educational progress of the Scheduled Castes as the corner stone of its political activism.

Earlier, in December 1960, a constructive agenda of promoting social and economic progress of the Scheduled Caste community through an organized platform was envisaged with the foundation of a Krishak Praja Parishad since a majority of these people happened to be backward agriculturalists.[78] While Sarat Chandra Jana became its President, Jogendranath Mandal became its Working President. Later, in August 1961, the organisation which had primarily begun to function as a socio-economic front acquired a political dimension and saw many of its members contesting in the general elections of 1962. Mandal contested from the Hanskhali constituency in Nadia and Bagda in 24 Parganas but in both he lost to the Congress candidates, P.R. Thakur and Manindra Bhushan Biswas.[79] In due course of time the organisation proved inadequate as it failed to encompass members from non-agricultural communities and with this end in view it was ultimately dissolved in June 1963 and in place

[77] Letter written by Jogendranath Mandal to C.B. Gupta, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, has been published in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, Vol. 7, pp. 16-17. Letter addressed to the Prime Minister ascertaining the same request has also been published in the book.
[78] See Appendix III for the manifesto of the organisation.
[79] Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, vol 7, p.117

of it the West Bengal branch of Ambedkar's Republican Party of India was established for a more focussed approach and a wider reach. The formal institutionalisation happened on October 16, 1963.[80]

The state of independent Scheduled Caste politics had been in sheer quandary in West Bengal as the discourse of social justice and representation was overshadowed by rehabilitation demands, for thousands of Namasudras who had earlier led a movement of social reformation and political empowerment but after 1947 had been rendered homeless and forced to become refugees. Much of their movement had also integrated with the Congress during the election of 1946, which even supported partition on the presumption that their territories would be included in India which however did not happen and the community was by and large forced to abandon their habitats due to the resultant communal disturbances. Loss of their political constituencies made it difficult for the leaders to contest with an exclusive caste-based agenda given that much of the pre-partition autonomous leverage of the discourse itself had been lost. In the first general election of 1952 Jogendranath Mandal contested as an independent candidate from the Beniapukur- Ballygung constituency where he projected himself as representing much broader concerns of both SCs as well as refugees. But in spite of much support from both SC as well as non-SC groups such as the local lawyers' association and the refugee women group Mandal lost the election to a not so well-known Congress candidate. The results of the first election had been rather ambiguous in indicating any definitive political choice of the SCs in West Bengal. Although the Congress could not win all the reserved seats, the Scheduled Castes Federation gained no seat and the independent candidates also fared badly. In any case a more particularistic and representative Scheduled Caste politics could not have been much assertive as the SC candidates had to contest for reserved seats in the general constituencies which meant that they had to seek votes of upper caste Hindus as well.[81]

Around the mid-1950s Mandal showed interest in joining Congress stating that "Congress today, is not separate from the Government. With the object, therefore, of offering myself for the services of the country and the people in wider field I have decided to join the

[80] Ibid, p.118
[81] Sekhar Bandopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: Meanings of freedom in post-independence West Bengal, 1947-52,* Routledge: London and New York, 2009

Congress."[82] Due to Mandal's popularity in the refugee camps, mostly composed of Namasudras and other Scheduled Castes, the leading members of the party had been quite keen to include him in order to restrain the Left's advances. But ultimately that could not happen as the lower level leaders of Congress opposed it.[83] Towards the end of 1963, Mandal was formally invited to join the Republican Party of India by veteran Ambedkarite leaders, B.K. Gaikwad, B.D. Khobragade and B.P. Maurya, after which he set up its branch in West Bengal.[84] As part of the RPI he extensively travelled in various parts of the country such as Agra, Aligarh, Nasik, Bombay, Ahmedabad etc. where he not only spoke of the Scheduled Castes' causes but also shared his own experiences of work in undivided Bengal and as Minister in Pakistan. The RPI also gave him a platform to learn of Scheduled Castes' experiences in other states. Thus, at an SC and ST welfare gathering held in the Calcutta University Institute Hall on December 8, 1963, Mandal pointed out that the Government of West Bengal unlike other states was not being just towards its own SC and ST population. Based on evidence he argued that education stipends were not disbursed regularly and vacancies and promotions in government services were rarely met.[85]

Meanwhile, outbreak of communal violence in early 1964 over the Hazratbal incident led to fresh rounds of refugee influx from East Pakistan. When Prophet Muhammad's sacred relics reportedly got stolen from the Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar in Kashmir, retaliatory riots broke out in Khulna from January 4 which also spread to Jessore thereby propelling a renewed spate of the minority's flight.[86] About 7 lakh refugees crossed over to the Indian side, with 4.2 lakhs entering West Bengal alone. 70% of these refugees had been agriculturalists.[87] As large numbers of Namasudra peasants streamed into the border districts in traumatic and vulnerable conditions, consequentially generating communal tension in West Bengal against the Muslims, a vigilant police tried to keep them in control, often through repression. Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, who had been until then an ardent Congressite became vehemently critical of the government after cases of police torture were reported in Bongaon and Habra in 24 Parganas, which were part of his own constituency. He also extended his

[82] *Hindusthan Standard*, May 3, 1955
[83] Gopal Hira, *Chinnamool Jibon itihasher Rooprekha O Prashangik Anubhuti* (History of a Splintered Life and its Relevance), Bangapathak Prakashan: Kolkata, 2012, p. 15
[84] Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, Vol. 7, p. 19
[85] Mandal's presidential address at the West Bengal SC and ST conference dated December 8, 1963, accessed from the personal collection of Jagadish Chandra Mandal
[86] *Jugantar*, January, 4,6,7, 1964
[87] P.N. Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, pp. 16-17

support to the Save Pakistan Minorities Committee and in its meeting held on March 28, 1964 in Habra he criticised the Indian government for pursuing a weakened policy towards Pakistan and show of indifference towards the minority in East Pakistan. At another meeting held at Helencha in Bagda on April 17, 1964, he gave his assurances to the committee of supplying volunteers from his Matua followers for squatting on the railway tracks of Pakistan bound goods trains with the purpose of an economic blockade of Pakistan.[88] Soon after, he was arrested for inciting public disturbances. Jogendranath Mandal who was also arrested later on April 30, for similar reasons, was kept in Dum Dum Central jail along with Thakur. Upon his release from jail P.R. Thakur resigned from his Assembly membership. Not only that, it is said that in the Assembly by-election in Hanskhali in 1964 for the vacancy caused by his resignation, Thakur had even supported Mandal's candidature against the Congress' nominee.[89] It was perhaps emblematic of a political conjuncture signifying reunion of old adversaries.

Around this time, Scheduled Caste politics in West Bengal faced some serious jeopardy under the union government's attempt to 'rationalise' the lists of SCs and STs in consultation with the state governments when it appointed a committee under B.N. Lokur in the Department of Social Security on June 1, 1965. In its recommended revision, the committee decided to make alterations in the existing lists which involved de-scheduling of relatively advanced communities amongst the SCs and STs as it was felt that majority of the concessions and benefits were appropriated by the numerically larger and politically more organised groups and not by the smaller and more backward communities who were more in need of them. In West Bengal, these castes were Namasudra, Dhobi, Rajbanshi and Sunri.[90] De-scheduling of these castes would not only mean their exclusion from the list but also enunciated consequential changes in the current numerical strength of the SCs, which in turn would determine the number of reserved seats in the Parliament as well as in the State Assemblies for the SCs. To make it worse for the Namasudras, the committee made it clear that 'Displaced Persons' belonging to castes which were scheduled in West Bengal and who had been rehabilitated in the newly established colonies in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa and Dandakaranya could not be justifiably included in the designated list

[88] File No: 2076/50, Subject: Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, Office of Deputy Inspector General of Police, Intelligence Branch
[89] Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, Vol. 7, p. 119
[90] The Report of the Advisory Committee on the Revision of the Lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Govt. of India, Dept. of Social Security, 1965, para 14 & 16, pp. 8-11

of SCs as, (a) they were in newer surroundings where practice of social disabilities was non-existent, as had been investigated by the Assistant Commissioners for SCs and STs in various states and, (b) as displaced persons they have been recipients of substantial rehabilitation benefits, not enjoyed by SCs of the concerned states.[91]

It was only after significant protests, with representations sent against the Lokur Committee report that the de-scheduling of the specific Scheduled Castes did not happen. Jogendranath Mandal featured conspicuously in this movement as he sent an extensive memorandum on behalf of the Namasudra community to Asok Sen, Minister of Law and the Department of Social Security, copies of which he also sent to the then Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri and the President of India. Mandal argued that the census of 1951 and 1961 had not properly recorded the actual numerical strength of the Namasudras, most of whom were illiterates who did not know the procedure or understand the relevance of being enumerated. There was also the fear of social stigma and discrimination which often prevented them from disclosing their caste identity. Only the literate ones insisted on recording their caste status. Besides, large sections of Namasudras had also been sent outside West Bengal, to Andaman, Uttar Pradesh, Dandakaranya, etc. As a result, the censuses showed them as a much depleted population. Mandal also pointed out through evidence that the Namasudras still suffered from social disabilities in West Bengal, where instances of their caste members being called out in pejorative ways such as 'chhotolok', 'chandal' etc. despite doing socially respectable jobs; continued practices of untouchability and; change of surnames intended to hide their caste for fear of being hated or looked down upon by people of other communities, were pointed out. Apart from these, Mandal also relevantly highlighted how their impoverished conditions resulting from partition related forced migrations had made Namasudra refugee students entirely dependent on government stipends to pursue their education, in the absence of which they would have to discontinue their studies.[92] In any case, Lokur Committee's consideration of de-scheduling those castes which experienced Partition displacement only seemed far too unreasonable as it failed to understand the existential problems of the people from these backward castes. Or, was it a case of state action aimed at censuring dissent given that large numbers of Namasudra refugees had participated in prolonged agitations against lacunae in government's policies towards their rehabilitation.

[91] Ibid., para 30, pp. 17-18
[92] Mandal's memorandum published in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath*, Vol. 7, pp. 87-91

These were however, tumultuous times for the Congress. After ruling the state uninterruptedly for almost two decades, the party went through serious crisis when Ajoy Mukherjee left to form a separate party called the Bangla Congress on the eve of the fourth general elections in 1967. Mukherjee, a veteran Congress leader from Midnapur and the then president of the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee had a major fall out with what he contemptuously called the 'Hoogly coterie' which effectively controlled the party led by their 'boss', Atulya Ghosh. West Bengal at this time was suffering from numerous maladies such as scarcity of food and essential commodities, spiralling inflation, administrative corruption and law and order problems.[93] As a result, the Bengali *bhadralok* grew increasingly disillusioned with the Congress in power and showed definite signs of drift towards Left politics. A workable anti-Congress alliance comprising the dissident Congress group, diverse Left parties as well as Independents had been formed before the elections. Although there were two electoral fronts by the Left, the PULF or the People's United Left Front led by CPI and the ULF or the United Left Front led by the CPI (M), both factions ultimately came together to form the United Front Government in 1967. The RPI announced its support for any electoral union that would contest against the Congress party both at the centre and at the state levels.[94] In line with the national electoral strategy its West Bengal branch declared its support for the non-Congress alliance.[95]

Jogendranath Mandal's candidature for the Assembly seat from the Barasat constituency was supported by CPI (M) led alliance.[96] The results of the 1967 elections were a watershed since the Congress government in West Bengal was finally toppled to form the first non-Congress government after independence. Of a total of 280 seats in the Legislative Assembly, Congress secured 127 seats, a larger number than any other party but still short of the required majority. The fourteen party coalition which came together to form government had among them the following distribution of seats- PULF secured 66 seats (Bangla Congress, 37; CPI, 16; Forward Bloc, 13); the ULF got 62 seats (CPI M, 43; SSP, 7; RSP, 6); Socialist Unity Centre, 3; Workers' Party, 2; Forward Bloc- Marxist, 1); PSP won 7 seats; Gurkha League, 2

[93] For a discussion on the nature of Congress politics in the post-colonial state of West Bengal see Marcus F. Franda, *Political Development and Political Decay in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1971; Prasanta Sengupta, 'The Congress Party In West Bengal: Politics, Patronage, and Power, 1947-1983 in Rakhahari Chatterji (ed.), *Politics in West Bengal: Institutions, Processes and Problems*, The World Press Private Ltd. : Calcutta, 1985
[94] *Dainik Basumati*, September 26, 1966
[95] *Dainik Basumati*, September 27, 1966
[96] *Dainik Basumati*, January 5, 1967

and Swatantra, Jan Sangh and Lok Sewak Sangh got one each.[97] Though the arrangement seemed precarious as it could sustain only on the basis of being able to garner complete unity among otherwise divergent groups but for the time being it revelled in being able to dismantle a long entrenched Congress from power. Jogendranath Mandal however, failed to win a seat despite being backed by the CPI (M). Unlike earlier times, Mandal was quite expectant this time as he was contesting from Barasat constituency, where apart from Debanga, the rest six centres had been Namasudra dominant ones and secondly, for his active role in resisting the Lokur Committee report, which had intended to de-schedule the Namasudra caste. But even then, he could not garner the requisite number of votes for himself. His son and biographer, Jagadish Chandra Mandal says that he lost the election primarily because he lacked the organisational support to motivate and mobilise his voter base. Within the limited time and means, the RPI could not develop an effective organisation in the *mofussil* areas and hence Mandal had to depend on the CPI (M) for political campaigning. The latter of course was more concerned with garnering votes for its own party, for which it made use of Mandal's popularity in order to reach out to the Namasudra refugees in government camps. In the end, Mandal lost out on mobilising votes for himself.[98] The following year Mandal died while on an election campaign and, with that a cautious resurgence of caste based politics of self- representation for the Scheduled Castes in West Bengal also met with an unfortunate and abrupt end.

Although the Republican Party could not claim any concrete gain from the electoral victory of 1967 but Jogendranath Mandal's efforts towards mobilising the lower castes was certainly symbolic in revitalising the discourse of caste which had lost most of its political currency in West Bengal after Partition. Unfortunately the movement saw an untimely death. On the other hand, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur also withdrew from mainstream politics to concentrate more on the spiritual consolidation of the Matuas through establishing the Matua Mahasangha. With both its leaders gone from the political vanguard and the community faced with periodic phases of dispersal, much of the vitality was lost. Not much later, rise of the political Left in West Bengal and its governance for over three decades eventually sapped out the very scope of the discourse of caste as it was made politically redundant.

[97] Marcus F. Franda, *Political Development and Political Decay in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1971, p. 86
[98] Jagadish Chandra Mandal, Mahapran Jogendranath, Vol. 7, pp. 134-140

Chapter 5

Understanding Marginal Memories: A study of the Namasudra settlers of a Refugee Village

> *"Those who migrated never thought of going back because they wanted to hold on to whatever they had acquired here, while those who were left behind also could not have come until it could not be endured any more, for they were there only to protect what they had there."*
>
> - Suren Ray, Sakdah, May 22, 2015.

The emerging genre of *self*-narratives from the marginal societies is fundamental in not only signifying critical disclosures about their peripheral world but also inevitably marking an epistemological departure from the dominant regimes of societal thinking.[1] Working on *dalit* personal narratives or autobiographical writings, Raj Kumar says that while the literary trend is fairly new and recent, these self-expressions may be interpreted as an act of resistance or an opportunity to assert their distinctive identity. Also, often in the absence of their representative voices, their stories are subsumed or appropriated within a broader, master discourse of the hegemonic classes. The partition of India was one such time. Ravinder Kaur has emphasised on the 'differing experiences' of the partition displacements based on the social divisions of caste, class and gender. On the basis of her research on the Punjabi refugees of Delhi, she says that the popular partition narratives are marked by noticeable absences of these differing parameters as the voices of the low caste and poor refugees or women seldom make an appearance.[2] Focussing on the impact of partition on the eastern

[1] Raj Kumar, *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*, Orient Blackswan: New Delhi, 2010

[2] Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947: Partition Narratives among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi*, OUP: New Delhi, 2007

side, this chapter endeavours to explore and analyse some of these 'differing' narratives that have been collected from the low caste, Namasudra settlers of a refugee village in West Bengal.

Although partition migrations were quite diverse for the different sections of the Hindu minority of East Bengal, the repertoire of popular memories hardly seem to make that evident.[3] Partition after all, had happened on grounds of religious difference while social hierarchies had remained intact and in fact were reproduced at every stage. The unabated practises of social differentiation among the Hindu migrants were hardly mentioned and often consciously suppressed in the more acceptable versions, either produced by the state or by the social elite. Resonances of the societal fissures however, could be easily discerned from the comparative narratives. Schendel and Rahman have identified a dominant 'strand' in the writings on refugees from East Bengal 'which brings out the voices and identities of a particular group of refugees to West Bengal, the Bengali bhodrolok (the educated upper and middle class), with their often traumatic and nostalgic memories of a lost homeland in East Bengal. Concentrating on refugees within these specific parameters, scholars have presented us with a partial picture of post- Partition population movements.'[4]

As already pointed out, the Namasudras had become a 'doubly marginalised' group after migrating to West Bengal, where along with their low and untouchable social status they also turned destitute refugees. Existing literature on partition's impact in the East have largely remained numb to their divergent and often more difficult experiences, in which they are either marked by their obscurity or reduced to inert descriptions of being the dispossessed and dependent 'camp' dwellers facing the vagaries of rehabilitation regime. The domain of displacement studies, both academic as well as popular/biographical, have been overtly preoccupied with the dominant discourses of the more urbane and educated middle class refugees of the Calcutta metropolis. The much celebrated 'self-help' groups with claims to have survived the perils of displaced existence without governmental assistance, not only insist on contrasting their struggles from those who had to take shelter in government camps, these accounts on hindsight also seem to determine all conventional understanding on refugee

[3] The divergent impact of partition on the low caste, Namasudra migrants vis-à-vis the Hindu *bhadralok* have been discussed in Chapter 4.

[4] William Schendel and Mahbubar Rahman, 'I Am Not a Refugee': Rethinking Partition Migration, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 3, July, 2003, pp. 555

crisis in West Bengal.[5] The peculiar experiences of the refugees from the lower socio-economic strata are fundamentally marked by their narrative absences.[6]

The present chapter undertakes a qualitative study of the refugee narratives of first-generation Namasudra migrants settled in a rural-agricultural colony in Nadia, a district that marks huge presence of migrant Scheduled Caste population owing to its proximity to Bangladesh. The study is pivoted on two thematic dimensions: first, the specific experiences of loss and dislocation of the Namasudra refugee-settlers and their rehabilitation and; second, the role of caste and social differentiation in this entire process as well as a comparative analysis of their past situations vis-à-vis their present.

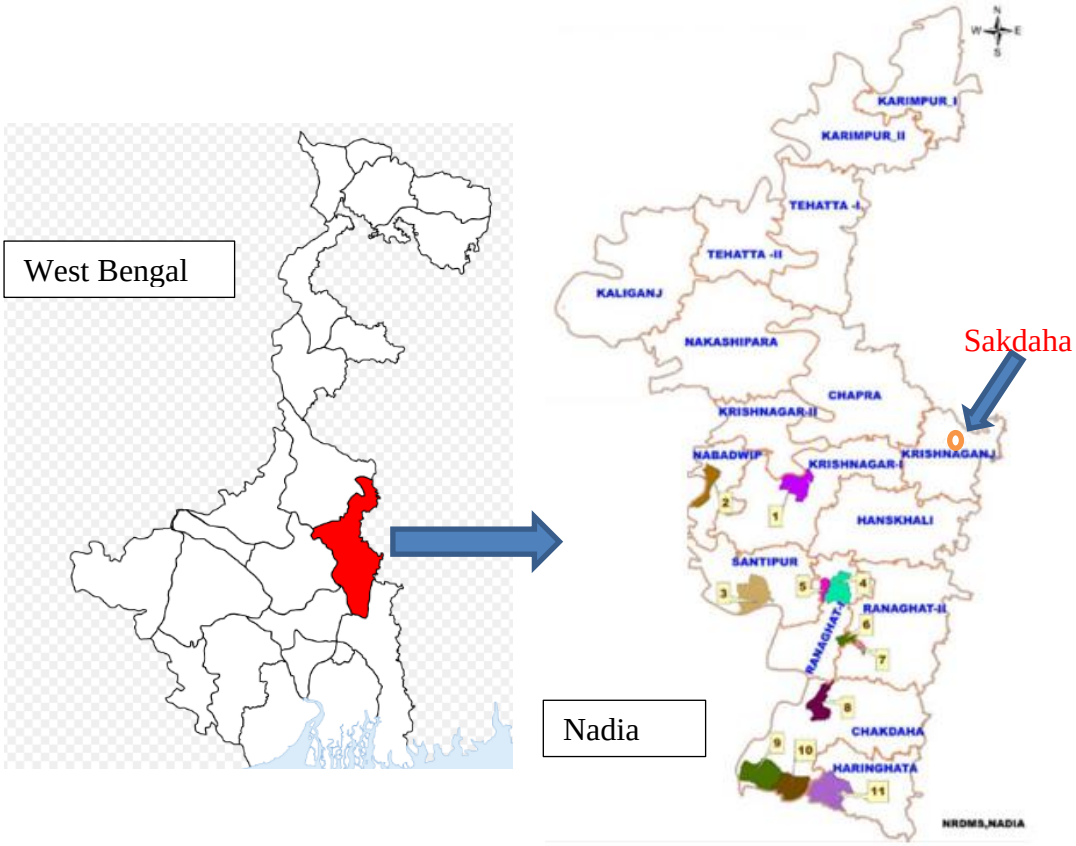
Field and Methodology

The research has been conducted in a village named Sakdaha in the district of Nadia, located at an approximate distance of 130 kms, from the metropolis of Kolkata towards its north. From Krishnanagar, the district headquarter of Nadia, the village is another 20 kms in the

[5]See Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and The Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Lumiere Books: Calcutta, 1990, for the middle class squatter's movements in Calcutta. While Chakrabarti by and large celebrates them as being self-dependent, Uditi Sen, writing more recently, is quite critical of these *bhadralok* refugees. See Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018. These works have been discussed at length in Chapter 4.

[6] Only recently, there has been some intervention to explore and analyse the nuanced experiences of specifically the low caste refugees of East Bengal. Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya have discussed the failed experiments of their rehabilitation in Dandakaranya. See Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya (ed.) *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, Routledge: London and New York, 2000. The brutal consequences of their genocide in the Sunderbans have been discussed by Ross Mullick and Annu Jalais. Mostly composed of Namasudras, large numbers of the low caste and poorer refugees who could not adjust in Dandakaranya took an inititive to resettle in a part of the Sunderbans archipelago on their own. This was unacceptable to the newly formed Left Front Government in West Bengal which responded with an economic blockade and physical massacre of the entire population there. See Ross Mullick, 'Refugee Settlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Feb, 1999), pp. 104-125 and; Annu Jalais, 'Dwelling on Morichjhanpi When Tigers Became 'Citizens', Refugees 'Tiger-Food'', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 23, 2005, pp. 1757- 1762. Latest, Debjani Sengupta has published on the Marichjhapi incident as part of an online series by The Wire, Bengal: Genealogies of Violence. See Debjani Sengupta, 'The Forgotten Massacre of Dalit Refugees in West Bengal's Marichjhapi' dated October 3, 2018, accessible on https://thewire.in/history/west-bengal-violence-marichjhapi-dandakaranya. In so far as their personal narratives are concerned, a nacent beginning has been made of late. Uditi Sen seeks to explore and analyse experiences of refugee settlements in the Andamans. See Uditi Sen, 'Dissident Memories: Exploring Bengali Refugee Narratives in the Andaman Islands', in Panikos Panayi and Pippa Virdee (eds.) *Refugees and the End of the Empire*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Also, see her book, *Citizen Refugee.* A recent trend of autobiographical/biographical publications by people from the SC community also reflect upon their intrinsic refugee experiences. See Gopal Hira, *Chhinamool Jibon Itihasher Rooprekha O Prashangik Anubhuti* , Bangapathak Prakashan: Kolkata, 2012; Manohar Mouli Biswas, *Amar Jibone Ami Benche Thaki*, Chathurta Duniya: Kolkata, 2013.

interior, close to the international boundary with Bangladesh. Post partition of Bengal, Nadia had become one of the most populous districts which saw largest concentration of Namasudra refugees, since the district shared its borders with erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, and saw massive influx from the neighbouring Namasudra dominant districts of Faridpur, Barisal, Jessore and Dacca. Sakdaha is one of the rural government sponsored refugee colonies which was set up under the West Bengal Act XVI of 1951, under the Joyghata vested land scheme.



5.1 Location of Sakdaha

The village is spatially divided in two parts – the originally inhabited village and the refugee colony that was carved out of the apparently unoccupied areas and established through official acquisition and allotment of vested land to the refugee families. The original residents of the village were a majority of the local untouchable communities of Bagdi, Bauri and Muchi. There were also the comparatively higher ranked, Goalas (OBC) and the Muslims. By the time refugees came, the Muslims of the village had evacuated to East Pakistan as a result of the skirmishes in neighbouring areas. In the immediate aftermath of partition, a few Mahishya (OBC) agriculturalists had crossed over from the adjacent Kushtia region when it

became a part of East Pakistan. Officially they were not considered refugees and they mostly occupied the lands that were vacated by the Muslims and this led them into constant confrontation with the refugees when the latter were allotted land by the government.

The refugee part of the village, which is called the Sakdaha colony is also multi-caste, comprising a minimal number of Brahmins, considerable number of Kayasthas, both high in the traditional social hierarchy; Kapalis, who are OBCs and; the Scheduled Castes, Namasudras who are numerically dominant in the village and Jeles (Jalia Kaibartta), traditionally a fishing community who had come much later. Sakdaha, including both the original village and the colony, is predominantly rural- agricultural.

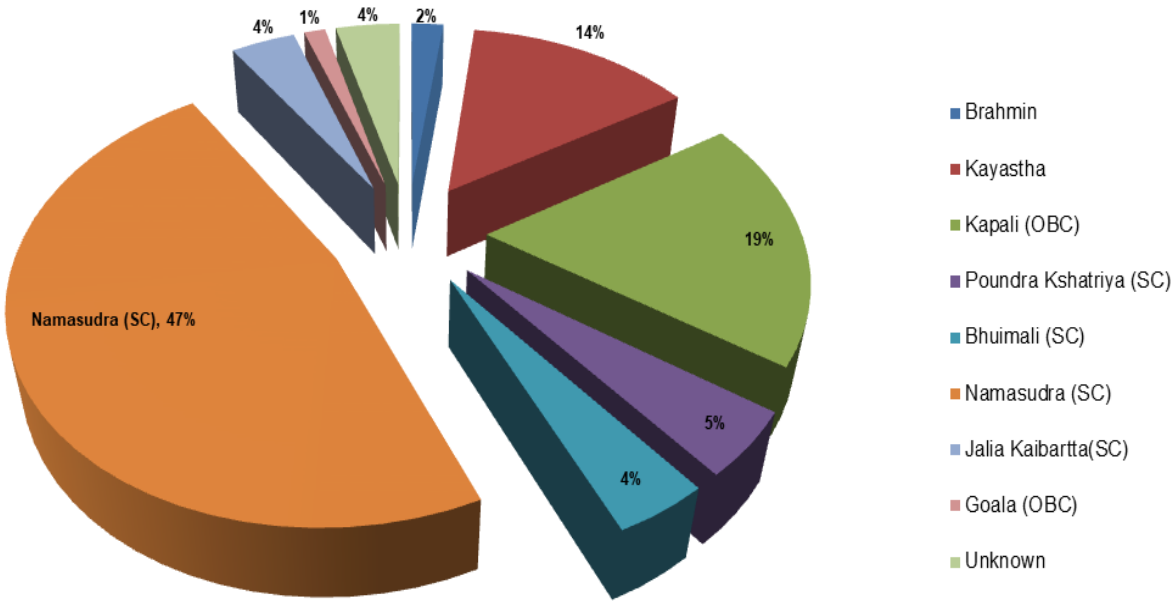
5.2 A Glimpse of the Sakdaha Colony

5.3 First view of the village – Lush green agricultural fields

The village is situated on the flanks of a rivulet (*beel* in local dialect), Palta, which used to be quite full in the earlier days but has considerably dried up in recent times. A spectacular view of the lush green agricultural fields forms a picturesque threshold to the village from the main arterial road. The village is surrounded by low lying areas on its numerous sides which remain submerged under water during torrential monsoons with rising water levels of the *beel*, while during the drier months the water recedes to provide some of the most fertile areas for cultivation, nourished by the replenished silt. The village has a post office, a cooperative agricultural bank and a school. It is under the neighbouring Krishnagunj Police station while the Panchayat office is in Sarnakhali, another 5 kms from there. It also has a considerably prosperous market place around a Vaishnav temple since Nadia had been an epicentre of the Chaitanya bhakti movement.

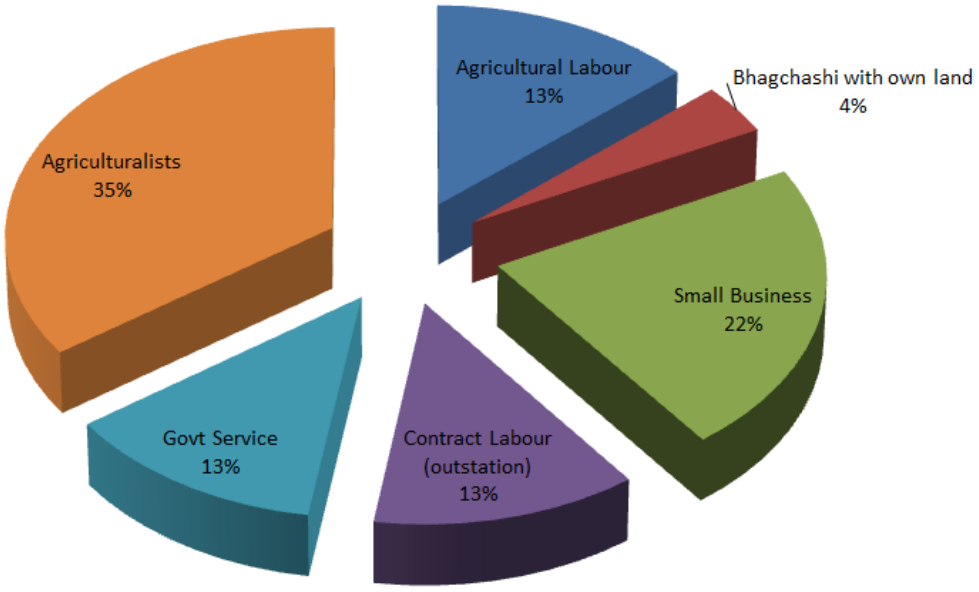
Since the Namasudras reside in the colony which is separate from the native part of the village, my study will focus only on the colony. As per the Electoral List of 2015, procured from the local Panchayat office, currently there are 150 households/families in the colony, although the original map of the colony (procured from one of the residents) mentions 173 housing plots.[7] The first-generation refugees however claim that around 108 families had been originally settled in the colony. This discrepancy between official figure and actual allotment is explained by the refugees as due to the irreclaimable lands from the surrounding jungles and water bodies which could not be made habitable. While some refugees have left to settle in the nearest urban townships of Krishnanagar and Majhdia, many others have moved in later, either through squatting or buying properties.

[7] See Appendix IV for the original layout plan of the Joyghata Scheme.



5.4 Pie chart indicating distribution of castes in the village

Currently an estimated 71 Namasudra families may be found residing in the village. They are largely agricultural, cultivating their own lands or working in others' fields either as *bhagchashis* or sharecroppers or as labourers. With some, the family income is often supplemented with small businesses like grocery/cycle repair/electrical shops in the local market. Of late, there has been considerable migration to the city, with taking up of contractual labourer jobs in the thriving real estate sector. The destinations vary from the nearby metropolis of Kolkata to flourishing cities in other states like Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh, Cochin in Kerala and Port Blair in the Andaman Islands. A few are also employed in the lower ranks of government or private services. These additional varieties of income sources are however a much recent phenomena, with expanding urbanism and opportunities in the labour market as well as limited access to education. The present study however seeks to focus only on the first generation Namasudra refugees, i.e. those who were the original migrants and settlers of the refugee colony. Their numbers fast dwindling due to illness and death, only 16 such respondents could be located, between the age limits of 58 and 92 years, who have been interviewed extensively over a period of time.



5.5 Pie chart indicating the familial professions

Selection of the particular research field has been principally motivated by two determinants: first, it is a multi-caste village with significant representation of various castes, both high and low as per the traditional Hindu hierarchy, nevertheless faced with a common situation of forced migration. Hence, it provides an optimum ground for observation of caste based relations. And second, is the researcher's familiarity with the area by virtue of sharing common caste as well as regional ties, which not only facilitated an easier scope of interaction as compared to what a situation might be with an 'outsider', but also ensured spontaneity in the respondents' narrations in course of the interviews/conversations. Here of course, the insider versus the outsider in the study of cultures may be invoked, which occupies a centre-stage in anthropological studies. Harping on the relevance of both as methodology, M. N. Srinivas argued, 'The insider and outsider have each advantages as well as disadvantages, and it is dogmatism to assert that one or the other is bound to fail.'[8] Applauding the successful study of Fei Hsiao Tung of his own society, of a village in the Yangtze Delta, about 125 miles south-west of Shanghai, Srinivas spoke of the critical advantages that an insider often has over an outsider, such as in Fei's case where he knew the local language. And that gave him an advantage of completing his work early, which might have taken a foreigner several years to complete, that too with an improbability of success in

[8] M.N. Srinivas, *Collected Essays*, OUP: New Delhi, 2002. Srinivas engages in an insightful discussion on the contrasting methodology of an insider vis-à-vis an outsider in the study of cultures, Pp.553- 560.

the end. Nevertheless, Srinivas does caution on the imperatives of maintaining some distance in case of studying one's own society.

This study aims to comprehend the lived experiences of the Namasudra refugee-settlers of Sakdaha through their oral narratives, produced through acts of 'memorialization'.[9] The essence of memory is that it does not limit the past to a historical sense of temporality but renders it alive, spontaneously and often unconsciously, to make it a part of our every-day life and in the process also considerably influences our current responses, to a great extent. The realm of memory therefore acts as an umbilical cord that not only connects but continues the past into the present. While discussing reminiscences of middle class Bengali refugees published in a Bengali newspaper of that time, Dipesh Chakrabarty defines the quintessence of memory as 'a complex phenomenon that reaches out to far beyond what normally constitutes an historian's archives, for memory is much more than what the mind can remember or what objects can help us document about the past.'[10] It is then far more complex, with moments of closure or conscious forgetting often for situations of pain and trauma or even those of sudden remembrances which might emerge unconsciously.

[9]Ananya Jahanara Kabir uses the term to understand the act of recollecting memories. She tries to explore 'memorialization' of partition as part of an ongoing process and considers creation of India and Pakistan in 1947 and the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 as profoundly interrelated aspects of that process. See *Partition's Post-Amnesias: 1947, 1971 and Modern South Asia*, Women Unlimited: New Delhi, 2013, p. 10. The usage of the term is purportedly different from the way it has been used by Vivek Dhareshwar who has used the term in a critical sense for construction of memorials to mark the sites of the horrific communal riot in Gujarat much like the memorials of the Jewish Holocaust. He says, 'This form of memorialisation is a way of making memory dead.' Dhareshwar has been quoted by Sucheta Mahajan in her work, Beyond the Archives: Doing Oral History in Contemporary India, *Studies in History*, 27, 2 (2011): 281-298.

[10] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Remembered Villages: Representations of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition' in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Inventing Boundaries: Gender, Politics and Partition of India*, OUP, 2000, p. 318

5.6 Respondents: Mahendra Mullick & Nityananda Das

Based on participant observation and through semi-structured interviews, the endeavour has been to allow sufficient autonomy to the respondents to react and respond and tell their stories 'their way'. Since most of them were village simpletons, who were often illiterate or lacking in any prior exposure to being interviewed, their initial reactions have been fairly diverse. Some of the respondents were quite enthusiastic to converse since they have never been approached to talk about their past. They even hailed the fact that now their story will be told. Some seemed hesitant to talk, their hesitations emerging from an inchoate apprehension of their voices being recorded, if it could harm them in anyway or even repatriate them to Bangladesh. Some were shy and lacked the confidence to speak. In more than one ways, the respondents' reactions highlighted the quintessential gap between the binary universe of the literate and the non-literate and despite my familiarity with the region, this cavity lurked and had to be conquered in subtle ways.

5.7 In conversation with Balai Das (van rickshaw puller)

As tough as life is in the villages, these places follow their own, routined divisions of work and leisure. Mostly agriculturalists, the villagers engage in laborious manual works that often involve the entire family. Most of the respondents said that they have a busy schedule from early morning, when they go out to the fields to work and remain engaged until the afternoon. Even the older people, some of the respondents aged between 73 and 92 years, actively participate in family labour and involve themselves in some daily chore or the other. Two of the respondents have grocery shops in the village *bazaar*, one is a clerk at a near-by government sponsored school and two are retired government employees. Hence, the optimal time agreed for conversations would generally be in the afternoons when the people would rest after their day's hard work or in the evenings when they would hang around in the local *bazaar* for a daily puff or gossip.

5.8 Winnowing and drying of paddy grains – 'boro dhaan'

5.9 In conversation with Nimai Bairagi & through his routine work at 6 AM

Based on their narratives, the thematic structuring of the chapter has been made under three rubrics- experiences of displacement and migration; processes and journeys unto rehabilitation and; resonances of caste in every-day life. The research does not claim to be exhaustive but it does take an industrious leap towards retrieving significant self-narratives of the Namasudra settlers that would have become extinct otherwise and attempts to reconstruct and provide an insightful picture of their lived experiences. And in doing so, the project proposes a methodological intervention against a more predominant focus on archival research.

Migration and Memory

Despite its geographical proximity with Bangladesh, most respondents of Sakdaha said that they had not gone back to visit their native villages. Those who went said that they had mostly gone around the time of their migration for tactical reasons as adult male members incumbent with tasks of transferring their family or sale and exchange of properties. Except Animesh Mandal who owns a grocery shop in the village bazaar, confessed of having revisited his homeland in Bhatulia, in Dacca district after Bangladesh was declared independent in 1971. His was an emotional yearn but he said that his expectations had mostly buckled in face of a 'felt' social transformation of the region.[11] Despite an alleged porosity of borders in the East, unlike how they are on the western side with Pakistan, often demarcated by mere stationing of mile stones or a temporary fencing over shared fields and, with continued practises of matrimony between both sides, it is indeed paradoxical to not find much cases of cross-border commuting. Most respondents agree that going to Bangladesh is not exactly unfeasible, be it through the official procedure or unofficial ways, but it hardly happens to be a popular exercise. The lack of undertaking such physical journeys notwithstanding, do not seem to match with similar absences from the subliminal spaces of popular memory. The '*desh'*[12] in fact, consistently reverberates in their every day acts of memorialization.

[11] Interview with Animesh Mandal, May 23, 2015. Mandal's emotional self represents an ambiguity. He says that he had followed his emotional desire to visit his traditional homeland after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. His timing was deliberate for owing to India's political support to the cause of Bangladeshi nationalism vis-à-vis a repressive Pakistani regime, it was congenial to travel inside Bangladesh despite a massive exodus. He said that the Muslims had assured him safety and protection. Upon reaching his village however, he could not connect with the changed social landscape. He says that relations between Hindus and Muslims had drastically changed as the Muslims would now come inside Hindu households which was not the case before. His relatives who had continued to stay there, according to him, were living in a state of social subservience to the majoritarian Muslim community who had encroached upon the erstwhile Hindu neighbourhood. Thus it was a state of emotional contradiction for him, which obviously had deeper cultural implications- a sense of trust towards Muslims on whose reassurance he could embark on his desired journey opposed to disdain on reaching his village and seeing the subsequent changes in the social equations between the two communities. A similar case of change in social geography and consequent marginalisation of Muslims by the Hindus may be pointed in Bengal and Punjab. For an overview see Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims since Independence*, Westview Press: Delhi, 1997. More recently, the minoritization of Calcutta's Muslims after partition has been discussed in Anwesha Sengupta, ' Becoming a Minority Community: Calcutta's Muslims after Partition', in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandopadhyay (eds.) *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, Social Science Press: New Delhi, 2015

[12] Here '*desh'* is not used to mean country or nation, for in vernacular expression, the term precedes such political formations. In every day usage, the term is used to signify one's traditional homeland, connected with ancestral lineage and hence the foundation of one's home and hearth.

This disjuncture between the two domains, physical versus psychological/emotional, is actually riveted in their contradictory sentiments of 'nostalgia' for an old home and 'trauma' for its loss.[13] It speaks of their liminal existence, between reminiscing an ideal past and living through the horrors of displacement. Most respondents said that they had never migrated out of their immediate vicinity in East Bengal either for economic necessities or otherwise. In fact they almost unanimously agreed that they had not seen any part of West Bengal before actually crossing over, for good. It is in fact ironical that as a territorial community that was traditionally rooted in the agrarian landscape of eastern Bengal, the Namasudras had to ultimately lose their anchorage under worst of circumstances. Thus, the discourse of liminality in their oral narratives is governed by two predominant motifs, that the Namasudras had never migrated before and, when they did, it was coercive.

The exigency that might have driven the Hindu *bhadralok* to decide on migration had been characteristically different from the case with their poorer and downtrodden sections and these 'differentials' also necessarily determined the realm of their respective memories. For unlike most upper caste Hindus, the Namasudras claim to have encountered 'actual' violence and genocidal circumstances.[14] The latter also had to face the brunt of the territorial dislocation unlike the more privileged classes who could navigate through the common troubled waters in comparatively better conditions. In most cases, the *bhadralok* had not been entirely alien to their newly acquired homeland, given that many had alternate arrangements of boarding or kin relations in West Bengal or those in white collar jobs could apply for a transfer and in worst cases, they at least possessed the social capital to help them sustain through the turmoil. Most respondents said that they did not have these social advantages.

[13] Dipesh Chakrabarty speaks of the contradictory relationship of the sentiments of nostalgia and trauma to the question of past, while discussing the structure of memory, as evinced through the essays first published in the Bengali newspaper, Jugantar from 1950 onward, which were later compiled in a book called 'Chhere asha gram' (or The Abandoned Village) edited by Dakshinaranjan Basu in 1975. The essays written by anonymous authors were a recollection of memories of their native villages in eastern Bengal, belonging to some eighteen districts. Written in the aftermath of partition, the essays were attempts to capture the sense of tragedy that the division of the country meant to the authors. While being nostalgic of their past, these essays speak of trauma bred by the tragedy that maintain an entirely different relationship to the historical events of partition. The authors express a sense of stunned disbelief at the fact that it could happen at all, that they could be cut adrift in this sudden and cruel manner from the familiar worlds of their childhood. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Remembered Villages'.

[14] Jayanti Basu in her psychoanalytical study of partition victims on the Bengal side based on interviews says that most of the upper caste Hindus had migrated not in the wake of any direct physical assault. Rather their decision had been propelled by an omnipresent sense of fear, as they apprehended 'Muslim torture' based on the hear-say stories of arson, rape and looting or because other Hindu families in the neighbourhood were leaving or in some cases the local friendly Muslims had advised them to. This she prefers to designate as 'soft violence' which she says is different from the cases of more brutal and direct violence and massacres that had been experienced on the western borders. See Jayanti Basu, *Reconstructing the Bengal Partition: The Psyche under a different violence*, Samya: Kolkata, 2013.

Satyendranath Biswas had continued living in his native village, Isorkandi, despite facing recurrent events of communal violence until he finally migrated in 1964 after the Hazratbal riot. For an agricultural community, it is an inseparable relationship with the land it cultivates and nurtures, that forms an umbilical cord for daily sustenance. Not only that, years of cumulative experience and acquired skills to harness conducive climatic conditions and soil fertility aimed to ensure a substantial yield also explains the territorial nature of this class. And that is precisely why the Namasudra agriculturalists had not considered migration as a plausible option in the first place. There were many who had stayed back hoping stability would come, as Satyendranath Biswas said, *"oi je asha, jodi shob thik hoiya zaye"*.[15] For Ajay Sarkar, it was indeed difficult for his family and other villagers to leave their home and hearth for an unknown land: *"...ochena deshe chole jawa nijeder bhite bhate chhere diye"*.[16]

The deltaic topography adequately inundated by the Gangetic distributaries had ensured sufficient agricultural production thereby giving the peasants lesser reasons to migrate elsewhere for additional income. As Nibaran Sarkar, aged 90 years, explains, *"okhane jolo hawa, aar ekhane rukkho hawa"*[17] - metaphorically evincing the topographical advantages which the agriculturalists had in eastern Bengal and which they severely lacked in the western regions. Thus, nostalgia of an 'ideal' past was not only mooted in an emotional veneration for a lost homeland but also embodied a material loss.[18]

The Namasudra refugee-settlers of Sakdah, mostly belonging to the outlying villages of Dacca, had migrated due to communal violence, either having experienced the horrific riots or due to a persistent fear of them. The respondents by and large agreed that there had been a sharp deterioration in communal relations after partition which led to their constant harassment by the Muslims. The recurrence of riots had also increased with every minor skirmish aggravating to brutal violence and vandalism. As Animesh Mandal, aged 72 years,

[15] Interview with Satyendranath Biswas, May 25, 2015
[16] Interview with Ajay Sarkar, May 26, 2015
[17] 'The wind there was cooler and here it is drier' (translation). Interview with Nibaran Sarkar, May 28, 2015.
[18] With the comparatively privileged and literate groups, the nostalgia for a lost past is more emotionally desperate than being materially so, notwithstanding the enormity of their economic losses which had come with their migration. But it certainly cannot be compared with the loss of subsistence experienced by the backward communities. Thus, with many upper caste Hindus the decision to migrate had not been as sudden as they would often claim. Through case studies Jayanti Basu shows that with many, the processes of looking for alternative arrangements in West Bengal had begun much before they had ultimately decided to migrate. But they refute any premeditated decision in this regard. Basu seeks to interpret this behavioural contradiction between a rational decision and an emotional disbelief as state of 'denial' at the turn of events. See Jayanti Basu, *Reconstructing the Bengal Partition*, pp. 107-108

said that riot was the most impelling reason that had finally forced them to migrate more than any other cause.[19] Here, the intrinsic experience of the low caste Namasudras, of being communally targeted by the Muslims appears to contradict the partition experiences of the untouchable communities in West Punjab who were deliberately left out of communal attacks since they were considered to be neither Hindus nor Muslims.[20]

While describing the riots, the respondents came up with ghastly depictions that they expressed with emotional outcries or sobs or even momentary silences. They spoke of how the Muslim marauders rampaged their villages, plundered and burnt down their houses and their stacks of paddy or *'dhaner gola'* as well as their agricultural fields.

> During the attack or under the impending threat of such an attack, the people would either flee to some nearby jungle or seek refuge in some Hindu dominant village. More often, one or more villages would congregate in a particular village where members of their community were in a majority, where they would build a ghetto for solidarity and common strength, should they be attacked by the Muslims.[21]

Animesh Mandal's disclosure particularly highlights the sheer vulnerability of the people and their rudimentary and spontaneous strategies in putting up self/community defence. Also noticeable is his interchangeable usage of the terms, Namasudra and Hindu. The Namasudras were certainly Hindus but were considered extremely low in the Hindu social hierarchy. Most of the respondents said that their villages in eastern Bengal were hardly composed of a mix of castes, so that most castes lived in the surroundings of their respective caste fraternity. However, a subjective binary enforced by the partition phenomenon often caused an otherwise dispersed Hindu identity to coalesce. Satyendranath Biswas of Isorkandi narrates how upon their village being pillaged, the villagers had walked for miles through the adjoining villages of Gutia, Andharul and Kasimbazar before they stopped to take refuge at

[19] Interview with Animesh Mandal, May 23, 2015

[20] Ravinder Kaur begins her work by referring to a popular Punjabi anecdote: "Two *chuhras* were busy sweeping the roads of Lahore during the Hindu-Muslim violence. While the Hindus were trying to flee away from the violence, Muslims were pouring into the city from India. One sweeper asked another if he knew why people were running here and there. The other answered that the 'Hindus are running to India while Muslims are looking for Pakistan. But we don't need to escape to another place and no body is going to touch us.' And they continued sweeping the empty streets." Kaur seeks to highlight the paradox of untouchability as a practice that eventually saved the low caste communities from being targeted during communal violences. See Ravinder Kaur, *Narrative absence: An 'Untouchable' account of Partition migration*, Contributions to Indian Sociology (n.s.) 42, 2 (2008): 281-306.

[21] Interview with Animesh Mandal, May 23, 2015

the house of the local zamindar, Dagu babu. They stayed there for a week before returning to their vandalised village and on the way back they saw corpses floating in the surrounding rivulets.[22]

The plight of the women amidst such violent occurrences has been adequately reflected in the narratives of Kamala Sarkar of Khonda, Shadlapur, of the Dacca district. Aged 83 years, she would frequently burst into emotional sobs while describing the gruesome incident. She revealed how the women were molested and abducted when her village was attacked by the Muslim rioters. In sheer desperation the villagers would flee to the surrounding jungles where they would be pursued and attacked by the Muslim mob who would then forcibly take away the women.[23] Most respondents said that their every-day life had been rendered difficult with the Muslim men becoming covetous of their women folk. As Animesh Mandal reveals that family/community honour or 'man shonman' was constantly under the Muslim threat, which also acted as a catalyst to their eventual flight.[24] Mangalmayee Sarkar however, prefers to emphasise on women's agency in offering resistance. Quite active physically at 85 years, she recollects of the fateful day when she had joined the men in her family to set up fortifications against a possible intrusion into their house when their village was attacked by a Muslim mob.[25] Evidence of such wilful agency and courage shown by the women in times of distress is often obscured by a more prevalent discourse of victimhood for them, either as objects of sexual abuse or abduction.

[22] Interview with Satyendranath Biswas, May 25, 2015
[23] Interview with Kamala Sarkar, June 01, 2015
[24] Interview with Animesh Mandal, May 23, 2015
[25] Interview with Mangalmayee Sarkar, June 01, 2015

5.10 Respondents: Nibaran & Mangalmayee Sarkar

Mutual antagonism and recurrence of violence in the wake of partition had significantly polarised identities between the Hindus and the Muslims but whether and to what extent did this communal 'othering' also facilitate and mobilise internal coherences within the respective communities is quite questionable. It is indeed ironical that even during emergencies, social demarcations had remained sacrosanct with the Hindus. Most respondents confessed that the richer gentry from the upper castes had left with partition or in its immediate aftermath. Ajay Sarkar of Bhatulia said, *"tara buddhiman, tara toh agei ashbe… amra oshikhito"* (they are intelligent so they came early… we are illiterate).[26] The expression succinctly captures the immense social divide between the privileged, higher caste sections who left early having foreseen the consequences while the poor and ignorant, low caste populations mostly failed to fathom the inevitable vulnerabilities. It also tells of the deeply segregated character of the Hindu villages which were based on separate caste communes.

[26] Interview with Ajay Sarkar, May 26, 2015

Perception of the 'other' for that matter was also by no means homogenous for there were obvious ambivalences in the relations with the Muslims. In more cases than one, the respondents agreed that they had been saved and protected by fellow Muslims. Some even distinguished between the local Muslims and Muslims who had migrated from Bihar after partition, saying that the latter caused more trouble. Nityananda Das recollects one such incident when he was pursued by a mob of mostly Muslims who had migrated from Bihar and how he was ultimately rescued by a local Bengali Muslim.[27] The respondents unanimously agreed that relations with the Muslims had been fairly harmonious before partition, as they often shared similar economic conditions. But at the same time they revealed that Muslims were not allowed to enter their houses and nor were there any practises of inter-dining with them. However, this self-contradiction in their behaviour towards the Muslims was not presented as conscious act of discrimination by them, for they said that even the Muslims did not object. They rather interpreted it as the necessary abiding of the societal norms that was mutually accepted.[28]

Relations between both communities had deteriorated from around the time of partition when minor scuffles would often inflate into major incidents of confrontation. Suren Ray mentions one such episode during the festival of Holi when an incident of Hindus putting colour on Muslims had sparked violence. Animesh Mandal however says that the reasons were more economic than religious. Muslims did atrocity on the Hindus with the purpose of evicting them so that they could then occupy their lands and properties. Therefore, whether it about the Hindus themselves or about the Muslim 'other', identities had not been rigid and in fact, were more evolving and often contextual. Neither could the Hindus exhibit any internal unity nor was the Muslim 'outsider' a consistent rogue. It must also be noted that outbreak of simultaneous riots in Bihar around the time of partition in which Muslim minority were deliberately targeted and forced to flee to East Pakistan, also played a factor in the vicious order of communal other-ing.[29]

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[27] Interview with Nityananda Das, June 02, .2015

[28] Shashi Joshi and Bhagwan Josh seek to understand the relation between the Hindus and Muslims in terms of cultural power relation, determined by an invisible *faultline* between the two communities. This faultline essentially defines the two communities as divergent cultural enclosures, which nevertheless maintain a tactical symbiotic understanding. In times of political crises such as riots or communal clashes, when respective 'internality' is invoked and mobilised, this apparently dormant cultural faultline becomes distinct and visible. See Shashi Joshi and Bhagwan Josh, *Struggle for Hegemony in India 1920-47: Culture, Community and Power*, Vol. III: 1941-47, Sage Publications: New Delhi/ Thousand Oaks/ London, 1994

[29] For a comprehensive understanding of partition's impact on the Muslims of Bihar read Papiya Ghosh, *Partition and the South Asian Diaspora: Extending the Subcontinent*, Routledge, 2007

With cessation of riot and strategic restoration of peace, the respondents revealed that they would return to their normal lives. This had become routine with recurrent phases of violent interruptions and those who had to endure were obviously the most vulnerable sections. Satyendranath Biswas who had migrated as late as 1964 said that their family did not leave earlier as they could not afford to abandon their agricultural lands, which were their sole source of income- *"Poisha chhara amra khamu ki?"* (What do we eat without any money?)[30] Kamala Sarkar provides a more poignant description of recuperations in the aftermath of a riot:

> On returning to their village, they saw that their house had been burnt and the crops that they had stacked from the fields destroyed. Even their agricultural lands had been vandalised and rendered useless. Somehow they managed a hand-to-mouth living surviving on the burnt crops. They had no money as the house had been plundered and all their valuables looted. Her father-in-law had to sell a tree to get some money that would sustain the family for the next few days.[31]

The account reflects not only the sheer helplessness of her family but also signifies their endurance and defiant will to hold on to their 'world'. But political equilibrium had drastically altered with the partition and with formation of a new Islamic state, old arrangements were meant to collapse. It was only a matter of time. The initial acts of plundering Hindu villages were only transient. Gradually the Muslims encroached upon their villages, either through buying lands from the migrants or forcibly occupying the vacated houses. For many, it meant the fall of their last guard.

The ultimate decision to migrate however was far from being abrupt and impulsive. More often, it had been a product of judicious and collective planning with responsibilities divided within the family or between kin groups. The dominant practice was that some members of a certain joint family would travel with other similarly divided families from a village or a group of villages, while the rest of the others would stay back. Since most villages were

[30] Interview with Satyendranath Biswas, May 25, 2015. A perceptive understanding of the helpless situation of the low caste peasant refugees from eastern Bengal has been poignantly captured by Joya Chatterji when she says, 'So, although staying on in East Bengal left them living in fear and prey to harassment many preferred that unattractive option to weighing anchor and throwing themselves adrift upon an unfamiliar sea.' See Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, p. 118. When the options were scanty and mostly unfeasible for these low caste peasants, they chose risking their lives in a known land rather than severe old bonds for an unknown destiny.

[31] Interview with Kamala Sarkar, June 01, 2015

based on a horizontal grouping of castes with prevalence of affinal ties or kinship bonds, these social relations seemed to play a pivotal role in influencing decisions. So, for example, Sunil Das' family was related to Debendra Sarkar and late Jamini Sarkar through matrilineal ties and hence when the latter decided to migrate along with several other families of Teghoria, they took along with them two members of Das' family.[32] Those who migrated would carry some money and meagre means for their sustenance on the other side. But often they were sabotaged at the borders. Kamala Sarkar reveals how they were rampantly searched by the *Ansars* at the border posts, who would take away all their valuables, leaving them completely dispossessed*: "ek kapore lokjon ke chherechhe."*[33]

There was also a sense of disbelief and denial that the people were migrating for good. Animesh Mandal said that his family had asked a familiar 'good' Muslim, fellow agriculturalist, to supervise their lands when they left.[34] Similar arrangements had been endorsed by many who were leaving. It shows an inner conflict, a certain imbalance between the rational self and its emotional counterpart. While the rational took cognizance of the exigency and sought feasible solutions, the emotional preferred to remain oblivious.

Any attempt to analyse refugee migration would be incomplete without a discussion on their modes and methods of travel. As Ravinder Kaur says, 'the duration of the journey and the means of transport used to undertake the journey are crucial indicators of the class differences that significantly altered the experience of displacement.'[35] With the kind of meagre resources at their disposal, the migrating Namasudras did not have much choice in deciding their course of journey. The actual process happened in stages over a period of time, using various means of transport that their limited resources could afford, before finally crossing over. Since the respondents were from the outlying villages of Dacca district, most of them had taken local trains to reach the Dacca town, where they waited for days and often months

[32] Tetsuya Nakatani's study of a border village with influx of Namasudra refugees post partition shows that most families had come through their relatives based on kinship and affinal ties, when their kinsfolk helped them identify available land. Nakatani's study however speaks of 'relatives who had already settled'. For example those who had been married 'on the other side'. So very often female relatives like married daughters, sisters or maternal grandparents would help them settle. See Tetsuya Nakatani, 'Away from Home: The Movement and Settlement of Refugees from East Pakistan in West Bengal, India', *Journal of the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies,* 12, 2000, pp. 73-109. In case of the refugees of Sakdaha who lacked such affinal relations in the western side, nevertheless such bonds actively played when migrations happened and groups were formed. Also, after the arrival of the first batch of refugees, such relations acted as the fundamental medium for the later migrants to enter an alien land when driven by emergency.
[33] Interview with Kamala Sarkar, June 01, 2015
[34] Interview with Animesh Mandal, May 23, 2015
[35] Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947*, p.74

for a ticket on the steamer, from Narayanganj, which was the only affordable source to cross the river, Padma. After staying put in the temporary camps arranged by the East Pakistan government, an extremely overcrowded steamer would finally take them across to reach Goalanda, from where they boarded a train via Darsana to reach Gede railway station on the Indian side or sometimes a little further to Banpur. Suren Ray said that after waiting for almost a month he was able to find some place in a privately owned steamer which had directly transported his family to Khidderpore, in the vicinity of Kolkata after two nights of travel.[36] Kamala Sarkar said, that her family had to take a far longer route via Cooch Behar when they migrated for good in the late 1950s, as given the exigency the people in desperation grabbed whatever option came their way.[37]

5.11 'Memorialisations' of migration

These myriad stories of migration of the low caste migrants are indeed a separate genre in the domain of refugee studies of Bengal, which renders fallacious any generic assumption on the demographic movement that the partition catastrophe had instigated. The extent of the exodus from East Bengal had been both massive as well as unprecedented in scale. Equally true was its heterogeneous character, as the narratives procured from the Namasudra settlers of Sakdah would testify. Their nuanced experiences stand in particular contrast to the *bhadralok* reminiscences that are more widely circulated.

[36] Interview with Suren Ray, May 22, 2015
[37] Interview with Kamala Sarkar, June 01, 2015

Experiences of Rehabilitation

> *Khub koshto korsi jibone. Dosh din baade pola paan der bhaath diya parsi. Ehon aar koshtor kotha koyo na, ehone shanti r kotha kao… Khuciya baar koirle aar amader ki hoibo.*
>
> (We have struggled a lot in life. After ten days the children could be served some rice. Do not talk about the toil, rather talk about peace. Unearthing the bygone past will fetch nothing.)[38]

Raidashi Sarkar was so overwhelmed at the idea of revisiting her past that she found it extremely difficult, also reluctant to an extent, to express much. Perhaps it was her way to seek a closure on her past. However, her emphatic mention of the 'toil' and hard labour in rebuilding life after migration, despite her choice to otherwise remain silent[39] over greater details alludes to the primary concern of her reminiscences. This emphasis on 'toil' occupies a ubiquitous space in all the narratives. The excruciating circumstances under which the Namasudra refugees migrated were no end to their ordeal, for it was only the beginning of a long journey of trial and error.

The rehabilitation regime invariably portrays the refugee-beneficiaries as dependent and passive recipients of state help, thereby obfuscating any nuanced participation by them in their self-recuperation. Such a discourse then emphasises on the primary agency of a benevolent state. But the actual processes that went into the workings of the rehabilitation system could not have been as unilateral. The eventual outcomes were far more dialogic between the state and the refugees than can be inferred from the estimation of figures in the government files. These nuances can only be captured from the inventory of refugee narratives.

Crossing over to the Indian side, the migrant Namasudras were received as 'refugees', with border slips issued to them by the Indian authorities. Those who migrated after 1952 had to come with Passport or Migration Certificate issued from East Pakistan. It is indeed ironical

[38] Interview with Raidashi Sarkar, June 04, 2015

[39] Significance of silence has been highlighted by Elie Wiesel who says that some trauma can never be spoken about directly; it can only be evoked through silence. Noami Rosh White also points out the 'difficulties in telling' faced by many survivors of the Jewish Holocaust. Cited in Sucheta Mahajan,' Beyond the Archives', p.294

that migration to the 'putative' homeland was hardly as integrationist as the telos of partition had claimed and which incidentally began with the official acts of sieving and classifying the partition migrants as refugees right at the nation's threshold. Namasudras were mostly devoid of both material means as well as social connections and hence many of them were compelled to take temporary shelter in various government camps located in the districts of Nadia and 24 Parganas.[40] Six out of the seventeen respondents said that they had lived in camps - Cooper's Camp at Nadia and Cossipore Camp near Kolkata.

Journey to the camp was not a direct one. The refugees had to spend one or more nights at various railway junctions before being transported to the camps. Debendra Sarkar said his family had to stay put amidst a huge crowd of refugees kept 'in waiting' at the Naihati station for two nights.[41] Debendra Mullick said that they had spent three days in Ranaghat station before being hoarded into huge trucks that were destined to carry them to the numerous camps.[42] Life at the refugee camp was far from being satisfactory but there wasn't much option for them given their economic status and lack of social connections. Description of the camps may be derived from the obtained narratives. Most of the camps were open, deserted spaces, mostly the military barracks constructed during World War II that had been converted into some temporary housing arrangement and that kept expanding as per the pressure of population influx. Debendra Sarkar stayed for a month at the Cossipore Camp, which he described as a huge, abandoned, double-storeyed building with long emptied dormitories where in hundreds of families were bundled together. Cooper's Camp at Ranaghat was a conglomeration of tented spaces or one-room Nissen huts meant to accommodate an overflowing population. Quite naturally, the refugee families spoke of either being clustered into cramped common halls or in case of the huts, two or more families living in a single small room, where days and nights were spent in sheer lack of privacy. Food was often communally cooked and limited ration provided weekly. Debendra Mullick said, the people used to spend days in idleness with half-empty stomachs as ration was supplied only on fixed

[40] The refugees from the upper and middle class sections did not prefer to go to the camps. Most of them relied on a system of social networking, through friends, relatives and acquaintances, to reconstruct their lives post-migration. Also, due to their class character, the metropolis of Calcutta appealed more to them where they hoped to find jobs or suitable professional opportunities. Even those from the middle class, of comparatively worse off conditions, who did not possess much resources had refrained from going to the refugee camps mainly because of their 'maan' (honour). See Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Living another Life: Un-Homed in the Camps' in Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ishita Dey, *Citizens, Non-Citizens, and in the Camp Lives*, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group: Kolkata, 2009, p.16.

[41] Interview with Debendra Sarkar, June 10, 2015

[42] Interview with Debendra Mullick, June 06, 2015

days in a week and families had to manage their consumption within the limited means. So why didn't they seek work outside the camp? They could have generated some extra earnings apart from the insufficient *doles* that they received as aid. To this Mullick said that it was difficult to find work in those days. The deficiency of work he agreed was often created by an unsympathetic local population who saw the refugees with fear and distrust. Such microcosmic ground realities seem to challenge dominant official stereotypes which described the Bengali refugee as lazy and indolent, depending on state aid in comparison with the self-reliant and industrious Punjabi refugee.

5.12 Respondent: Debendra Mullick

Owing to their dependent status reliant on government will, the refugees who had to take shelter in the camps could not wield much choice and had to capitulate to whatever was being offered. Sukumar Sarkar however, points out that where it was possible the refugees did employ ingenious methods of tackling the official system to their minimal advantages.

> "With the outbreak of epidemic in their camp which had resulted in large number of deaths of the inmates, his father within his paltry means chose to shift his family out of the ghetto. He took a small room on manageable rent price, in Bhowanipore for the family, but hardly had any money to feed them. So, for food, he would go back regularly to the camp to collect their assigned ration."[43]

[43] Interview with Sukumar Sarkar, June 12, 2015

Sarkar's family could not have survived through the epidemic otherwise. His is one of the understated stories of 'self-survival' outside a paradigm of dependence, by and large held for the camp refugees. Given that the six respondents could ultimately procure their resettlement in Sakdaha, their stay in the camps happened to be a transitory one that ranged between a minimum of a week to a maximum of two months period. Their duration of camp-stay was comparably far less than many other refugees of their category who had to stay put for much longer periods, often for years in anticipation. It also made them immune to the pressures of facing 'dispersal' outside West Bengal and therefore made them less disposed to political mobilisations that had been quite rampant in the camps. The refugee camps after all, had been sites of contestation for the creation of the state.[44] Whether it was Congress or the Left parties, political potential of these ghettos was realized in no less time. However, for these Namasudra refugee-settlers of Sakdaha who had mostly migrated with the initial outflow of the distinctive lower sections of the Hindu minority, the fact that they could procure a scope within West Bengal ultimately made them peripheral to an endemic refugee movement.

The respondents, by and large, did not express any disgruntlement against the state. But at the same time they were quite insistent on their agency in the eventual output. The settler narratives are replete with memories of their spirited initiatives in locating *suitable* lands. These are vivid descriptions of how the refugees would go out regularly looking for appropriate agriculture based habitations. Nityananda Das said that their initial allotment of a more urban Chakdah had been turned down by the refugees as it failed to meet their requirement as agriculturalists.[45] Suren Ray said that after leaving Cooper's camp, he had spent two years in Nakashipara trying to settle down on this own, through cultivating for the local zamindar who had given him some land to build a house. But persistent oppositions by the local *Goala* community who had been traditionally cultivating the zamindar's lands eventually forced him to look for alternate arrangements.[46] More often, these instances of local disaffections often amounting to fierce oppositions against the incoming refugees by the natives who saw them as potential competitors, encroaching on their fortunes made matters worse.

[44] Ishita Dey, 'On the Margins of Citizenship: Cooper's Camp, Nadia', in Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury and Ishita Dey, *Citizens, Non-Citizens, and in the Camp Lives*, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group: Kolkata, 2009, p.29
[45] Interview with Nityananda Das, June 02, 2015
[46] Interview with Suren Ray, May 22, 2015

Ultimately, finding Sakdaha as a site for rehabilitation was more an outcome of the refugee agency rather than governmental intervention which was quintessentially limited to an act of official apportionment. Nityanada Das is full of radiance when he recollects his first encounter with the village:

> It had become their daily routine to venture out of the camp in search of land for settlement. They had been granted that discretion by the authorities. They went to Chakdah, Badkulla and Bethuadahari. Anyway, the land originally allotted to them by the government in Chakdah was hardly useful as they were peasants who wanted 'chasher jomi' (agricultural lands) and the land there could not be cultivated. So, during one such ventures, they arrived at Krishnanagar. It was unbearably hot and they had not liked the place at all. They decided to travel to the rural interiors. With limited options of local transport, they mostly had to travel on foot for hours until after they had crossed a small township called Bhimpur that they met with vast stretches of agricultural lands on the banks of a rivulet teeming with fish and fresh water. The lands had belonged to the Muslims who had evacuated to East Pakistan. The refugees were satisfied and instantly chose to settle there. Later, the lands were occupied by the government as 'khas jomi' (vested land) and subsequently allotted to them.[47]

Das' account inevitably seeks to highlight the paramountcy of the settlers' initiative in the entire process of sieving and selection of the appropriate area. His claims have been corroborated by others, albeit adding more nuances. So for example, Ajay Sarkar, though not directly involved since he was quite young at the time of his migration, testifies it to be a popular account that he had grown up hearing, of 'how the elderly would roam around looking for vacant lands'.[48] Others like Mahendra Mullick and Debendra Sarkar have mentioned the invaluable help of one Nipen Bose, a zamindar of their native locale in East Bengal who had migrated early and had suggested to them about resettlement in Sakdaha.[49] These versions are of course not substantiated by official records. It is indeed difficult to ascertain the absolute truism of such oral accounts, for the extent of their authenticity belong to the realm of subjective belief. But even apparently 'wrong' tales can be valuable. As Alessandro Portelli tells of the multiple versions of Luigi Trastulli's death, a twenty-one year

[47] Interview with Nityananda Das, June 02, 2015
[48] Interview with Ajay Sarkar, May 26, 2015
[49] Interview with Mahendra Mullick, June 06, 2015; interview with Debendra Sarkar, June 10, 2015

old steel worker from Terni, in central Italy, who had died in a clash with the police on March, 1949, during a workers' protest against the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty by the Italian government. He says, 'They allow us to recognize the interests of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them.' Quoting Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Portelli further says that after all, 'History is an invention which reality supplies with raw materials. It is not, however, an arbitrary invention, and the interest it arouses is rooted in the interests of the teller.'[50]

Apart from those who shifted from the refugee camps, the rest of the respondents said that they had directly come to Sakdaha. They came to know of it through their kin and caste connections. References to certain proactive individuals such as Sudhir Biswas, Biswanath Biswas, Tarini Kanta Biswas, Surya Kumar Sarkar, who were acknowledged as 'respectable' men in the fraternity can be recurrently found in their narratives. These men are largely believed to have taken active initiative in circulating information about the agricultural colony. It appears that there had been a viable web of social networks between both sides of the international border that kept vital information in circulation. In such times of crisis, often inter-caste relations, based on common ties of nativity, were fostered for acquiring common interests. The respondents made interesting revelations of how, owing to their obvious limitations, they had managed to secure support from some of the persuasive men of upper caste background in order to represent their common concerns, presuming them to be better disposed to interact with the government personnel. The names of Biren Bose, a 'less fortunate' relative of the zamindar, Nipen Bose, from Teghoria in Dacca and Dhirendranath Kundu, from Barisal are frequently reckoned. Ajay Sarkar says that these people from higher castes were not only proactive but more importantly, they were literate and culturally more adept to interact with the government agents, with far more conviction.[51] The fact that the Relief Officer overseeing their matter had been a 'Bangal'[52], a migrant from Comilla, also aided their cause fundamentally. But persuasion could not have worked without the necessary show of numbers and in here the Namasudra settlers made their presence felt through making their numerical assertions. Certainly, these were myriad ways in which tactical alliances, cutting through the traditional hierarchies were garnered for achievement of necessary ends.

[50] Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, State University of New York Press: New York, 1991, p. 2

[51] Interview with Ajay Sarkar, May 26, 2015

[52] Those who came from East Bengal were popularly called 'Bangal' by way of differentiating them from the people of West Bengal. It was used mostly as a cultural construct to mark the *difference* in dialects, food habits, etc. of the people from the eastern part of Bengal.

After selection of the site, the actual process of settling down was quite a mammoth task, which happened only gradually, through distinct stages. Initially the *selected* refugee families were put up in temporary camps near Bhimpur, around 6 kms from the colony area until the official allotment of lands were made to individual families. Each of the 108 settler families received separate lands for housing and cultivation- 5 cuttah for building house and 3 acres or 9 bigha of agricultural land. They were also provided with a settlement loan of Rs. 1200/- as an estimated cost for their requirements and 2 *'ban'* of tin for building houses. A ration of basic food supplies was given initially till the refugees could become self-sufficient. The allotments were made on the basis of the patriarchal nuclear family, treated as the unit of rehabilitation. But the refugee families seldom operated as discrete units as they moved with an appendage of relatives, friends and acquaintances, owing to the circumstances of their displacement. In that case it necessarily implied that the allotments meant for a smaller size of family had to be informally distributed within a much larger, extended family, much to the detriment of the refugees. Digendranath Sarkar, did not qualify for a rehabilitation allotment, despite being present at the time of the distribution, owing to a constricted vision of the policy.[53] The latter was a minor who had migrated with a relative's family.

After the disbursal, the refugees were largely left on their own. The government's role as a benefactor stopped at sanctioning of rehabilitation scheme, distribution of plots and some meagre allowances to survive the 'gestation'. The *real* agency in making the colony functional exclusively belonged to the refugees. Since all tasks had to be done by the refugees themselves, it was deemed convenient to shift to a place closer to the colony, which would save their time of commutation from Bhimpur. The refugees therefore moved with all their paraphernalia, to put up tents at Baishnab Doa, a partially submerged stretch of land with the only advantage of its proximity to their newly ascribed settlement. When asked about their first impression of the area, the respondents came up with the most vivid and anecdotal descriptions of 'how things were'. Imageries such as '*khola maath*', '*morubhumi*', '*gorosthan*', '*jongol*' recur as common denominations in most narratives to describe how uninhabitable these places had been. These descriptions in vernacular refer to the vast stretches of abandoned barren lands with intermediate jungles of tall trees and dense shrubs, inhabited by fox and jackals and infested with snakes and other kinds of poisonous reptiles.

[53] Interview with Digendranath Sarkar, June 10, 2015

There was also the fear of carnivorous animals as two of the respondents even insisted on having seen tigers in the surrounding jungles.[54] Practical difficulties were also enhanced by anxiety of the supernatural as the place had been a Muslim cemetery. Debendra Sarkar recollects of his grisly experiences of removing countless human skulls while clearing his housing plot.[55]

There is a persistent stress on '*koshto'* or hardship in the refugee narratives, which indicate the extent of their strenuous efforts that they invested towards establishment of their new settlement. With minimal equipment at their disposal, which they either had or purchased with the loan, the respondents recollected how it had taken them days to clear the jungles. The tin supplied to build houses was barely sufficient and had to be appended with *kachcha* houses made of mud and thatched roofs. The enormities of the tasks were constantly reckoned but at the same time the prowess of doing them were also emphasised. The hardworking Namasudras had not been entirely inexperienced in this kind of difficult manual labour, as Nibaran Sarkar tells. Even the agricultural fields had to be cleared before they could be readied for cultivation. While some areas had been fertile, most of the lands were kept fallow by the local cultivators, which were rendered cultivable only through the tremendous toil and efforts of the Namasudra settlers.

There were obvious hiccups of acclimatisation with their new occupational conditions. Owing to an essentially riverine topography, the soil in East Bengal was constantly inundated by river water and hence adequately replenished- *"Jol uthto jomi te tar por chash hoto",* as Debendra Mullick exclaims[56]. In contrast, the soil texture of their new acquisitions was markedly different, being less fertile and comparatively much drier, and in most cases had not been optimally ploughed. The initial years had been one of trial and error, confesses Nibaran Sarkar, as they took time to comprehend their new environs.[57] Various productive methods such as rotation of crops and growing of leguminous plants were systematically put into practice by the agriculturalists to add soil fertility. Often it would take as long as two years to facilitate the lands for a good produce.

[54] Certainty of such claims does not find corroboration from other sources such as studies on refugee camps in Nadia. However, it has been mentioned since the refugees were quite emphatic.
[55] Interview with Debendra Sarkar, June 10, 2015
[56] Interview with Debendra Mullick, June 06, 2015
[57] Interview with Nibaran Sarkar, June 02, 2015

This toil or '*koshto*' also had a gender dimension. While the men engaged in the more laborious tasks of the 'outside', investing all masculine energy to make the fields cultivable, the women would attend to the incumbent tasks of the 'inner world' such as setting up the house, doing household chores and tending the children. As life was hard and resources were scanty, the women had to skilfully manage the daily needs of their family through the meagre supplies of subsistence. *"Bela deikha bhaat khaisi"*, says Kamala Sarkar while referring to the difficult times, when daily subsistence could only be assured through skipping one or two meals in a day, instead of an ideal intake of three course diet.[58] Often, in order to increase the volume of food, the women would add extra water to cooked rice, locally called '*panta bhaat*'[59]. As there were more mouths to feed and lesser hands to work, the women, apart from performing their traditional roles, were also required to pitch in the 'public space' jobs. A customary gendered division of labour was often transgressed when the women said that they also had to involve themselves in their husband's work. The women readily participated in clearing jungles and doing agricultural tasks such as threshing and sifting of grains from the paddy, boiling and drying them before they could be readied for the market. Mangalmayee Sarkar, whilst recollecting her past was simultaneously enacting it in her present, winnowing the *boro* paddy which had just arrived from her fields. Apart from helping the menfolk, the women also engaged in autonomous sources of earning in order to contribute to the meagre family income. Kamala Sarkar divulged how the women would do weaving work provided by the local small scale and cottage industries. Thus the exigencies of every-day survival saw the women who had led relatively cloistered lives in east Bengal take on a variety of roles subsequently.

5.13 Mangalmayee Sarkar - separating the grains from the husk

[58] Interview with Kamala Sarkar, June 01, 2015

[59] It is a popular food item in the rural areas of Bengal where, they put water in cooked rice and keep it overnight so that it get slightly fermented and produces a pungent taste.

Despite evidences of significant mobility in gender roles, it was hardly a universal phenomenon. Not all refugee families allowed their women to work in open fields. Kamala Sarkar says that although she could do weaving work, which did not necessitate her 'going out' of her house, she was not allowed to help her husband in cultivation. This discrepancy was of course, more importantly related to the economic status of particular families. Thus the family of Kamala Sarkar had been comparatively much better-off than Raidasi Sarkar's at the time of their displacement from East Bengal. Post-Partition, the rehabilitation regime had also operated in a way through its policies that ensured and reinforced the control of male refugees over their female family members. The allotment of lands, housing materials and subsistence allowances were all made against the male 'heads' of refugee families, so that the women remained dependent on the adult male members of the family for accessing rehabilitation benefits.

Until the crops could be ready before long months of trial and error, the people had to depend on limited ration provided by the state, which was highly inadequate. And hence, in many cases, they were forced to take to mendicancy, wandering around adjoining villages in search of food. Animesh Mandal provides harrowing details of how in lieu of their labour, the government would pay the refugees in ration like whole wheat or *gom* as they called it and the people would not even have enough money to convert it into *atta* or the powdered form that would render it edible. And then some day when they would be paid in cash, they would run to the mills in the neighbouring towns to grind them for consumption.

Mostly illiterate, the respondents however revelled in their efforts to set up a primary school for their children, amidst testing times. The School was established primarily under the initiative of Biswanath Biswas who had been a school teacher in his village in East Bengal. The refugees claimed how they had collaborated to put up a temporary structure from their own limited resources and devoid of any initial governmental aid. Ajay Sarkar is jubilant to recall the enthusiasm with which the children despite their '*chhinnamool obostha'* (state of dispossession) would swarm to school.[60] Not many among the Namasudra settlers had the opportunity to attend schools in East Pakistan, except for those who had migrated from Isorkandi in Dacca who proudly spoke of a Secondary School in their village. When the school had been vandalised by the *'eideshi'* people, mostly *Goalas* and *Mahishyas,* the

[60] Interview with Ajay Sarkar, May 26, 2015

respondents said that they not only re-established the school once again on their own but also judiciously informed the incident to the authorities to avoid any repetition of such incident.

5.14 Sakdaha High School

The rehabilitation experiences of the Namasudra refugees of Sakdaha colony elucidate a nuanced case study of self-agency. On the whole it represents a subversive discourse to a master narrative of a 'paternalist' state on one hand and 'self-reliant' refugees of the middle class and upper caste background, on the other. Any reductionist attempt towards deliberately limiting the experiences of the low caste refugees, in terms of their overwhelming presences in the government camps or their state of dependence for that matter, stands challenged by these oral narratives which evince an alternate imagery. The respondents by and large agreed that theirs had been a strategy of tactical cooperation with the government, with enormous self-efforts to ultimately achieve what they possess now. However, their overall contentment with the kind of government support that they had received also marks a significant divergence from the dominant middle class perspective.

Social Relations in the Colony

There was a generic sense of loss and destitution resulting from the partition mayhem, across the socio-economic barriers that also amply characterised the Sakdaha colony, a mixed caste settlement in terms of its social composition. Apart from a fairly large Namasudra community, the village represented a considerable presence of the higher castes, OBCs and also, a comparatively lesser number of other Scheduled Caste communities such as Poundra Kshatriya, Bhuimali and Jalia Kaibartta (also called *zaula*). The whole purpose of deliberately selecting a multi caste village was aimed at seeking to understand contours of social relations among diverse caste groups within a new found world of a refugee settlement. The governing research concerns are – to explore if the 'new world' staged a reproduction of an older, traditional order. Or, interfaced with newer challenges, one could apprehend some concrete reshuffling to have happened. The scope of this study would obviously be limited to the perspectives of Namasudra settlers.

Most of the respondents agreed that the trauma of territorial division and the ensuing circumstances of migration had not only rendered them but also the higher castes of the colony both homeless and dispossessed. Ajay Sarkar referred to this common state as '*chhinnamool'*, which according to him mitigated practice of social discrimination. Thus, any question on experiences of caste based discrimination when posed to the respondents would largely begin with an expression of denial. Then, would it mean that the renditions of caste as a system of social differentiation had gone sober or redundant with the post-partition arrangements? Lack of caste visibility in the state in terms of finding gruesome cases of atrocity or oppression carried out by many upper or middle caste communities upon the Scheduled Castes in many other parts of the country have often led to an assumption that caste based hierarchies hardly exist in West Bengal. This of course, has been nurtured by the thirty four years of Left rule in West Bengal that had proclaimed the irrelevance of caste and asserted the ubiquitous importance of class as the only relevant category in the state.[61] Some of the recent studies that have made significant interventions to question the Left parlance on the discourse of caste in Bengal highlight the unequal sharing of power in the state. Partha Chatterjee, for example, points out 'the continued and unchallenged dominance of upper-

[61] Sarbani Bandopadhyay, 'Caste and Politics in Bengal' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 15, 2012, vol. XLVII No. 50, p. 73

caste Hindus in virtually every public institution, whether political or cultural', but at the same time his analysis stops short at the political, emphasising 'the complete dominance of the political over the social' through the party structure which supplanted every other social institution and ensured the dominance of the upper caste Kolkata-centered leadership over local politics.[62] In any case, the social according to Chatterjee saw a metamorphosis where refugee lives were 'radically sundered from the traditional patterns of rural life in East Bengal, deeply shaped by caste and communal relations', so much so that even in the rural societies, caste discrimination had become a 'distant memory and were not transmitted to the next generation'.[63] Chatterjee's argument certainly finds resonance with the '*chhinnamool'* metaphor of Ajay Sarkar which symbolizes a sense of complete loss shared by all the East Bengali refugees. But what fails conviction is that despite a shared common loss that had apparently neutralised the value of caste, it is only the upper caste Hindus who could eventually rise to positions of power. Does it then imply that the lower castes could not garner any agency to rise up to their occasions? The nuances of caste hierarchies are in fact far more entrenched than can be readily fathomed. Prolonged engagements and deeper conversations with the respondents seemed to unravel more complex realities of every day practices.

The social topography of the rural refugee colony of Sakdaha is divided into several clusters or smaller units of neighbourhood called *para* that are based on caste.[64] Thus, the higher castes of Brahmins and Kayasthas live in one *para*, while the much lower, Kapalis (OBC) live in another and the Scheduled Caste communities of Namasudras and Jeles (Jalia Kaibartta) live in respective separate *paras*. Though distribution of the housing plots for the refugees had been randomly allocated by the government but the respondents say that the residents had themselves opted for their own familiar zones. Hence, the attempt had not been so much to sunder the traditional social structure but to largely reproduce it in the new habitat. Speaking of how the old divisions were kept intact in the new social environs of the refugee settlement of Netaji Nagar in Kolkata, Manas Ray says 'how subtle and comprehensive was the process of normalization of divisions… The internal boundaries

[62] Partha Chatterjee, 'Historicising Caste in Bengal Politics' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, December, 15, 2012, vol. XLVII No. 50, p.70
[63] Ibid.
[64] '*Para'* is a Bengali word for neighbourhood or locality, usually characterised by a strong sense of community. Historically, each *para* consisted of people of similar livelihood or were based on caste.

settled, we felt comfortable with our own habitat.'[65] The familiar world of the old society was far too entrenched to be shattered by even such a massive phenomenon such as Bengal's partition that was after all provoked by reasons of religious opposition so that the internal stratification within respective religions were held intact. The respondents of Sakdaha however, confess that over the years there has been considerable intermingling between caste groups, although in the earlier days untouchability had been practised rampantly. Nityananda Das reveals that there were obvious restrictions on commensality while inter- caste marriage was unthinkable at that time.[66] In fact the lower castes were not even allowed to enter the premises of higher caste homes and were certainly not invited for their private ceremonies, for reasons of social pollution. The Namasudras also claimed that not all Brahmins propitiated their customary rituals, only particular ones did. It certainly indicated reinforcement of the old practises of social segregation. Notwithstanding, the respondents agreed that such practice of reproducing the older order had occurred through mutual acceptance between both the higher and the lower castes in order to reinstate old familiarities in their new surroundings.

Relations with the local caste groups of West Bengal who were socially superior to the Namasudras like the Goalas, Gorai and Mahishyas were particularly strained. The respondents in this case, were quite vociferous about their experiences of deliberate stigmatisation by these caste groups. The Goalas and the Mahishyas, they said, refused to take water from the tube wells located in their areas and usually refrained from any social contact with them. Not only that, the Namasudras complained that often they would set fire to their crops and damage their ploughs and sickles to prevent them from cultivating. Allegedly they had even demolished the primary school that the refugees had set up. While such offensive acts by the local caste groups may be interpreted as economically motivated since the vacant lands which they had unofficially occupied and used had been allocated to the refugees by the government, at the same time it also reflects upon the sheer disdain that the *eideshi* castes of similar occupational status had for their refugee cohorts. Mangalmayee Sarkar nevertheless, insists on the caste factor as she says that these local castes, socially higher to the Namasudras found it increasingly unacceptable that low caste refugee-agriculturalists could get to own more land.

[65] See Manas Ray, 'Growing up Refugee', *History Workshop Journal*, No. 53 (Spring, 2002), p. 155.
[66] Interview with Nityananda Das, June 02, 2015

Reproduction of the old order was also faced with new challenges as social co-existence acquired additional importance given the inevitable reshuffling that had occurred. As immunities of the caste homogenous villages of eastern Bengal had crumbled with displacement, in new settlements like Sakdaha which were multi-caste, the Namasudras despite their ritually low caste status became considerably dominant by virtue of their physical strength and numerical majority. Nityananda Das says that their caste was extremely 'feared' by both the higher caste refugees in the colony and the local caste groups in the village.[67] More often, these factors of strength were translated into inter-caste cooperation, particularly in negotiating necessary rehabilitation measures from the government. So the illiterate agriculturalists would often form tactical alliances with upper caste refugees whose more vocal members like Biren Bose and Dhiren Kundu from the Kayastha '*para'* appeared better disposed to approach the government offices. But the upper castes lacked in numbers. The Namasudras invariably contributed through a show of their numerical strength, thereby rallying behind and strengthening an agenda of common interest.

Apart from this, since Sakdaha was an agricultural settlement the Namasudras turned indispensable for their traditional expertise in agriculture. As the other castes did not have much experience in cultivation, the Namasudras were consistently invoked for necessary help. Mahendra Mullick says that the Kayasthas had never practised cultivation before, *'langol dhoira parto na'*.[68] Many from the upper castes who were not agriculturalist by occupation had in fact falsely registered themselves as one with the authorities in order to avail the lucrative benefit of land allotments. For the initial years, Ajay Sarkar claimed, most of the people had taken to cultivation irrespective of their traditional occupational practices.[69] To this extent, the partition havoc seems to have struck at the normative rigidities of caste occupations, which innately loosened the strains in social relations, albeit in a limited way. Later however, many belonging to the higher echelons disposed of their lands to eventually shift to the urban areas. But those traditionally attached to the soil continued to live in the village. Most respondents said that they have been able to retain their government allotments and in fact have expanded them through further acquisitions. Social equations in the *bazaar* or the village market had to be tactically maintained as Sunil Das who owns a grocery shop there, claims that most of the village *bazaar* was dominated by the Kapalis who often

[67] Interview with Nityananda Das, June 02, 2015
[68] Interview with Mahendra Mullick, June 06, 2015
[69] Interview with Ajay Sarkar, May 26, 2015

encroached upon his area. When asked whether he faced any trouble attracting customers from the higher castes, he shyly responded that he would apply ingenious ways such as offering commodities at comparatively cheaper prices that would inevitably attract customers to his shop.[70]

5.15 Village Bazaar

The refugee settlement of the rural-agricultural colony of Sakdaha critically reflects upon a migrant society caught between the vestiges of an old world and the newly emergent challenges. While incidents of caste atrocity or violence were lacking, symbols of oppression were not entirely absent, as has been pointed out. By and large, there was complicity in believing that the traditional social norm and hierarchy had to be respected, particularly with the much older, first-generation, Namasudra refugees. But at the same time, there was also a self-consciousness and recognition of their own strengths. Most of the respondents said that they had voted for Jogendranath Mandal when he had contested from Hanshkhali in the late 1950s because he was a Scheduled Caste leader and would therefore work for the upliftment and welfare of the community.

The nuanced experiences of the Namasudra refugees tend to collapse any generic discourse on the 'Bengali' refugee. This chapter through undertaking a case study of a particular refugee settlement seeks to highlight the indomitable ways in which the poorer section of

[70] Interview with Sunil Das on June 03, 2015

refugees had to endure the exigency of the partition phenomenon that was intrinsic to them. Also, in emphasising on their active participations in the processes of rehabilitation the chapter attempts to prove that agency also rested with these people. It therefore proves to dismantle any dominant theory, be it the official typecasting of the Bengali refugee, dependent on the government as passive recipients of the state's patronage, or the middle class claims of exclusive agency and self-help as refugees. And in doing so, it necessarily cautions against the microcosmic realities of an essentially stratified society that would inevitably prevent any common discourse on the refugees as such.

Conclusion

Political decline of the Left in West Bengal since 2009 seems to have opened the Pandora's Box, of identity-centred politics based on caste and religion. The rise of Trinamool Congress made scope for renewed debates on identity that allowed a possible resurgence of the caste question when the Matua Mahasangha acquired limelight in the 2011 elections, with both CPI (M) and TMC seeking its support and the Matua Mahasangha finally supporting the TMC, which also came to power. The Left in its thirty four years of tenure in West Bengal had manned its electoral mobilisation around the issue of class, where caste was never seen as a major determining factor. But, with the 2011 Assembly elections in West Bengal, the role of caste became a point of contention that was profoundly discussed in *EPW* after Praskanva Sinharay argued in 2012 on the relevance of caste in West Bengal's politics with the political assertion of the Matua Mahasangha, representative of the Namasudras. In response to Sinharay, Uday Chandra and Kenneth Bo Nielsen said that caste was always a factor in the state but was not evident due to lack of ethnographic research. Sarbani Bandopadhyay and Partha Chatterjee have emphasised on the importance of colonialism and partition on the way caste politics in Bengal was affected. Ranabir Sammaddar has however, dismissed the exceptionality of caste politics in West Bengal through questioning the scale of the Namasudra movement.[1] The exchanges on *EPW* have led to broader discussions on upper caste hegemony in West Bengal that dominates all political parties and also, co-option of the Left's mode of functioning by the Trinamool Congress, leading to continued marginalisation of lower castes from mainstream politics.[2] However, the recently held Lok Sabha elections in 2019 have once again renewed focus on caste in West Bengal as it saw significant mobilisation of lower castes including Namasudras towards the BJP.

In light of an emerging interest on the scope of caste politics in West Bengal, this thesis seeks to understand its relevance during the critical period of Bengal's transition from the colonial

[1] For a synopsis of the debate in *EPW* see https://www.epw.in/engage/discussion/caste-relevant-west-bengal-politics

[2] Ayan Guha, 'Is There A Second Wave of Dalit Upsurge in West Bengal?', *EPW*, Vol. 54, Issue No. 2, 12 January 2019, https://www.epw.in/engage/article/is-there-a-second-wave-of-dalit-upsurge-in-west-bengal

to the post-colonial, examining the underlying reasons for its eventual decline. Unlike the other Indian states like Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu which saw a more progressive and gradual development of lower caste politics, in West Bengal its linear progress was seriously disrupted by partition's menace. Cased based representative politics of the Scheduled Castes lost much of its earlier edge as the once proactive and politically assertive Namasudras were virtually pushed into political oblivion, which also duly explains the purpose of this research project.

The Namasudras in Bengal, a lower caste community of predominantly peasant background, felt empowered by the constitutional reforms of the Government of India Act of 1935 that considerably expanded the rural electorate on one hand, and reserved seats for the Scheduled Castes on the other. As a result, there were 13 elected members from the community out of the 25 Scheduled Caste MLAs who decided to support the Krishak Praja Party coalition government formed after the elections of 1937 based on common 'class' interests. Economic depression and agrarian crisis of the 1930s had fermented a new political cult, quite 'plebeian' in character called the *Praja* movement that appealed to large sections of the Muslim peasantry and also the Namasudras to an extent. But the new scope of representative politics seemed to challenge the influence of mainstream political parties as the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha began approaching the SCs in more concrete ways and the Muslim League sought to enter the ranks of the Muslim peasantry. In any case, despite a socio-economic distinction in the countryside, between the upper caste, Hindu *zamindars* and lower caste, Namasudra and Muslim peasants, relations within the peasant class had also been quite volatile. There had been repeated cases of violent encounters between the Namasudras and the Muslims much before rural politics was actually communalised in the 1930s and 40s. Thus, it is not surprising that the last decade of colonial rule, which saw massive communal polarisation and frenzy, did not fail to encompass the marginal communities.

Political rise of the Muslims representing a subversion of the traditional power equation in Bengal coincided with escalation of riots and disturbances in East Bengal as there were simultaneous processes of communal mobilisation of the Namasudra peasantry by the Hindu Mahasabha and other Hindu communal organisations. Meanwhile, hasty preparations for the Second World War and the resultant Bengal Famine of 1943 which devastated and pauperised the peasant population of East Bengal, also became a fertile ground for harvesting mass based communal politics, especially after the Muslim League assumed power in April,

1943. Ironically the new cabinet of Chief Minister, Nazimuddin, happened to include three Scheduled Caste ministers with two from the Namasudra caste.

Communal mobilisation of Namasudra peasants by militant Hindu outfits notwithstanding, a growing religious antagonism between Muslims and the Namasudras in the 1940s was also driven by deep seated economic motives where the Muslim peasants were enticed with the promise of Pakistan. My point of departure from Sekhar Bandopadhyay, who has exclusively focussed on communal mobilisation of Namasudra peasants by Hindu groups, is to emphasise upon a simultaneous and equally rigorous mobilisation of the Muslim peasants as well by the Muslim League with its 'Pakistan demand'. Abul Hashim's democratisation of the Muslim League's party structure and his draft manifesto defining the objectives of Pakistan to establish a socialist state and an equal society based on the values and ideals of Islam fed into the most idealistic imaginations of the Muslim masses, oppressed by the Hindu zamindars for a long time. It also meant economic prosperity for a majority of backward Muslims who lived in eastern Bengal. An incessant propaganda for Pakistan eventually sharpened the divide between both sections of the peasantry, a presumption that stands validated by the fact that large sections of Namasudra peasants who had remained in East Bengal after partition as the 'residual minority' when most of the upper caste Hindus had migrated to India were specifically targeted and forced to evacuate.

But this was also the time when Ambedkar's call for an exclusive and consolidated movement of self-determination of Scheduled Castes was making headway in Bengal, with Namasudras leaders like Jogendranath Mandal becoming its major proponent. After briefly allying with the Congress, Mandal stood disillusioned when Subhas Chandra Bose was expelled from the party. He along with several other Scheduled Caste leaders increasingly grew cynical of nationalist politics which drove them closer to a promising anchorage in Ambedkar.

British government's sudden *volt face* in its closing years that refused to support a demand of separate representation of the Scheduled Castes in matters related to the transfer of power had triggered Ambedkar's All India Scheduled Castes Federation in July 1942. As the Cabinet Mission Plan included the SCs in the General (Hindu) category based on the election mandate of 1946, it led Ambedkar to launch country wide *satyagrahas* in protest and also condemn the

Poona Pact with the Congress which he said was the real reason for the Federation's electoral defeat despite its candidates doing well in the primary elections.

Jogendranath Mandal's emphatic pursuit of Ambedkar's movement in Bengal faced considerable flak from his caste compatriots as an ideological rift widened in the ranks of leadership between those who became drawn towards a majoritarian discourse of nationalist integration such as that of the Congress and those who insisted on making distinct demands for their section. Mandal was criticised and condemned for his participation in Muslim League's call for Direct Action on August 16 that degenerated into the 'Great Calcutta Killing', when he was actually responding to a call for supporting 'minority rights' against the political impasse of the Cabinet Mission Plan. This ideological binary of 'autonomous' versus 'integration' discourse reached a climax with the debate on Bengal's partition and the fate of the Namasudras becoming a point of contention since they lived in East Bengal. Indeed it led to a fierce dialectic with both sides insisting on what they thought was right for the community. In the end partition happened based on the index offered by the results of the 1946 elections.

Jogendranath Mandal chose to live in Pakistan and joined the Pakistan government as he was opposed to the idea of partition since most Namasudras living in East Bengal would find it difficult to migrate and also because of the assurances given by the *Qaid-e-Azam* to protect rights of the minority communities. As Mandal became the temporary chairman of the first Pakistan cabinet as well as the Minister of Law and Labour, it certainly meant promising for the Scheduled Castes in East Pakistan. Not much later, Mandal submitted his resignation from office expressing his disillusionment with the Pakistan government. While his decision to stay back in East Bengal that became a part of Pakistan seemed to defy the logic of partition and meant a hopeful continuance of a politics of self-determination for the Scheduled Castes, his resignation from Pakistan government symbolised its eventual crippling in both parts of Bengal, much to confirm his initial apprehensions.

Mandal's letter of resignation to the Pakistan government which discussed in detail his eventual disappointment with its state of affairs, also provided an empirical account of the miseries of the minority population that certainly ran in contradiction to the official statements. The letter stands useful in informing the phenomenon of unabated migrations on the eastern side. Unlike Punjab, where partition migrations were almost complete by 1950, in

Bengal, its massive scale started only after the riots of 1950 in Khulna, Barisal and Dacca and which marked the advent of a new category of refugees who were poor and ordinary and belonged to lower caste and tribal backgrounds. As Namasudras largely living in these districts became daily targets of communal vandalism, huge sections of them migrated under conditions entirely different from that of the Hindu *bhadralok* living in East Bengal. With the exodus of 1950, large numbers of Namasudra peasants started migrating in phases, over a prolonged period, for reasons of communal persecution, impact of the Hyderabad and Kashmir issues, passport 'scare' and deteriorating economic conditions. Upon migration, they became 'doubly marginalised' as they suffered from the dual stigma of their low caste status and the newly acquired refugee identity.

Mostly unfamiliar with West Bengal, the Namasudra migrants neither had resources nor useful caste networks to help them sustain themselves, which meant that they had to depend on the vagaries of a rehabilitation system. Those who migrated before April 1958 were considered as 'old migrants' and were entitled to rehabilitation assistance but those who migrated between January 1964 and March 1971 could avail rehabilitation benefits as 'new migrants' only outside West Bengal. Unfortunately those who migrated in the intervening period, i.e. between April 1958 and January 1964, could not get any help owing to suspension of official procedures to discourage 'irrational' migrations. A large number of Namasudra migrants were 'dispersed' to other states such as Uttarakhand, Andaman Islands, Orissa and Bihar as the state government fretted over paucity of resources. In 1958, a mega project of integrated development was launched in Dandakaranya by the union government with the primary aim of colonizing the difficult terrains of Koraput and Kalahandi districts of Orissa and Bastar in Madhya Pradesh through refugee labour and eventually resettling there the vast mass of refugee agriculturalists from East Pakistan who happened to be mostly Namasudras.

The fact that a large number of Namasudra refugees had to stay in government camps and depend on the state for their daily succour inevitably made them more vulnerable and often saw them stereotyped as passive recipients of rehabilitation in contemporary official accounts. While the struggles of the 'self-help' middle class refugees who refused to go to government camps were hailed by the Rehabilitation Commissioner, Hiranmoy Banerjee, a discourse that eventually became more popular; in comparison the everyday struggles and resistances of the Namasudra refugees went understated for obvious reasons.

The refugee camps were no submissive spaces; instead, they symbolised the everyday struggles of its residents, from agitating against the deficiencies of relief supply or their uninhabitable living conditions to being the ghettos that became potential political constituencies for the political parties. The strength of the refugee movements led by the Praja Socialist Party led *Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan* or the CPI led United Central Refugee Council were in fact drawn from these camp ghettos. As the Namasudras became targeted for 'dispersal' outside West Bengal, which grew more coercive with the Dandakaranya project of rehabilitating the refugee agriculturalists, a distinctive movement of the camp refugees emerged from the late 1950s. Jogendranath Mandal's *Purba Bharat Bastuhara Samsad* (PBBS) even submitted an exhaustive list of cultivable lands available in West Bengal to the Chief Minister, B.C. Roy. The high point in camp movement was perhaps the Bagjola agitation which began in January 1958 when refugees of the Bagjola Worksite Camp instead of their promised resettlement in the marshy lands that they had reclaimed were asked to vacate the camps and proceed for rehabilitation to Dandakaranya. The movement grew intense with as many as twenty two camps staging simultaneous hunger strikes in June 1961, which was however retaliated through severe repression when the police opened fired upon protesting refugees in Bagjola and Ranaghat, killing several inmates. Although the Bagjola killing drew criticism and was severely condemned by various political parties, the CPI and the Jan Sangh alike, the Union Government seemed more adamant on executing the Dandakaranya plan.

Eventually the movement had to phase out for reasons of its obvious limitations since first, the camp refugees were dependent on the state; second, Union Government's decision of dissolving the Rehabilitation ministry after March 1962 and third, the 'new migrants' after 1964 were offered rehabilitation only outside West Bengal. In any case, a movement intrinsically involved in subaltern interests failed to garner as much support from the self-conscious and vociferous section of *bhadralok* refugees who seemed more intent on preserving their rehabilitation gains. In this sense, any generic assumption of the Bengali refugee as a homogenous category has been seriously questioned and collapsed in this thesis.

Dispersal of large numbers of Namasudra refugees outside West Bengal prevented the community from regaining its earlier strengths, numerical and political, and effectively stalled a possible resurrection of the caste question in regional politics. Jogendranath Mandal, upon his return from Pakistan, certainly took an initiative to revitalise a discourse of caste

through organising the lower caste refugees against dispersal from West Bengal or opposing and agitating against a proposed de-scheduling of the Namasudra caste by the Lokur Commission and finally though the edifice of Ambedkar's Republican Party of India which he joined in 1962. His sudden and untimely death proved to be an irreparable loss for the Scheduled Caste community in West Bengal. At the same time Pramath Ranjan Thakur's decision to retire from politics meant political eclipse of the Matuas as their *guru* deemed it significant to focus on the sect's regeneration.

Deliberating on Bengal's 'castelessness', Dwaipayan Sen has recently argued that it was born of the 'coercions' that were intrinsic to the *bhadralok's* 'misrecognition' of Scheduled Caste politics. He says that transition to post-colonial rule had to ensure that the *bhadralok* political class from the upper castes regain their domination and therefore any self-deterministic gesture by the SCs such as Jogendranath Mandal's had to be systematically undermined. According to Sen, both Congress and the Left had been alike in this, being predominantly composed of upper caste members.[3] The Marichjhapi massacre after the Left Front came to power in 1979 certainly validates this point. The episode involved brutal killing of hundreds of Namasudra refugees who came away from Dandakaranya in the hope that the newly formed popular government that championed the refugee's cause would be sympathetic to their distress and agree to reabsorb them in West Bengal. But on reaching Calcutta when they were urged to return, with many even forcibly sent back, around 10,000 of them under the leadership of Satish Mandal chose to set sail and seek resettlement on their own in Marichjhapi, one of the islands in the Sunderban archipelago. Their defiance became unacceptable and on January 26, 1979 the then Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu unleashed an economic blockade and massacre of the refugees under the pretext of protecting 'reserve forests'. Debjani Sengupta describes it as a saga of denial, deprivation and state-sponsored annihilation of the Scheduled Castes that has few parallels in post-independence Indian history.[4] During the three continuous decades of Left's rule in West Bengal, the incident was barely brought to public scrutiny. The Marichjhapi massacre was quite symbolic as it epitomised suppression of any self-deterministic attempt of assertion by the lower castes just like the way the Left Front government also delegitimised the political relevance of caste itself.

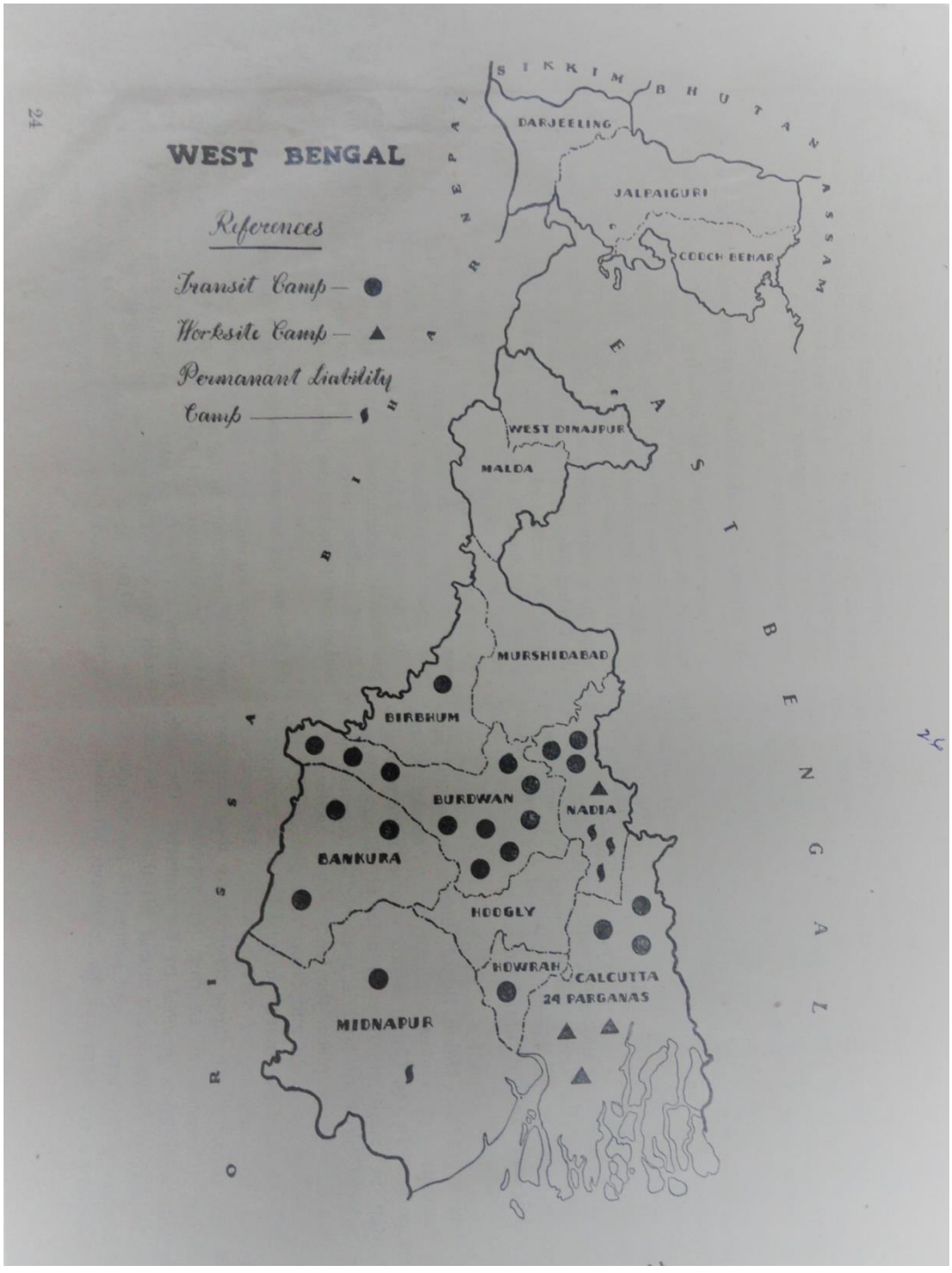
[3] Dwaipayan Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018

[4] Debjani Sengupta, 'The Forgotten Massacre of Dalit Refugees in West Bengal's Marichjhapi', https://thewire.in/history/west-bengal-violence-marichjhapi-dandakaranya

A fairly recent trend of *dalit* self-narratives that include personal narratives, memoirs and autobiographies, are critical testimonies of their peripheral world that amply testify nuanced practises of caste hierarchies in an otherwise *bhadralok* society in West Bengal. Certainly an alternative genre in *Bangla* literature, this emerging trend embodies an epistemological departure from normative thinking and helps corroborate unspoken histories of marginalised communities. In light of this new intervention, the last chapter of the thesis makes an attempt to understand the realm of marginal memories, through undertaking a qualitative analysis of the oral accounts of first-generation Namasudra settlers of a refugee village, Sakdaha, in West Bengal. The main thematic of the study is based on, first, the memories of loss and displacement as well as the resettlement experiences of the refugees and second, the role of caste and extent of social differentiation in the entire process.

Appendix - I

Types of Refugee Camps in West Bengal



Source: *Millions Came from Eastern Pakistan, They Live Again. Director of Publicity, Govt. of West Bengal, 1954*

Appendix - II

Memorandum submitted by Purba Bharat Bastuhara Samsad

List of cultivable lands and information pertaining thereto in the district of 24 Parganas, Murshidabad and Nadia, submitted to the Chief, Minister, B.C. Roy by Purba Bharat Bastuhara Samsad.

District 24 Parganas

CANNING POLICE STATION

1. In Mouza Tambulda of Tambulda Union about 18,000 bighas of good land lying fallow. In Mouza Moukhali Kumarkhali of that Union about 2,000 bighas of such land available.
2. The land about 20 miles in length from Taldi found after the river Vidyadhari has dried up will yield about 30,000 bighas of cultivable land in khas possession of Government.
3. From Taldi upto Singheswar about 8,000 bighas of very good land owned by Sri Manmatha Sanpui and others and recorded as fishery.
4. In Mouzas Naskarpur and Parbatipur Rajkrishan Naskar's 1,000 bighas, Sri Kshetra Mohan Mandal's 1,000 bighas, Sri Bejoy Kumar Swarnakar's 2,000 bighas, Sri Nibaran Chandra Bag's 2,000 bighas, Achhel Ali Naskar's 300 bighas and Dindar Zemindar's about 2,000 bighas of good land lying fallow.
5. Near Narabunia in Canning P.S. Jamaddar Musalmans have got about 4,000 bighas in Mouza Narabunia very suitable for cultivation.
6. Under Herobanga and Jharkhali Scheme of the Government more than 30,000 bighas of land available.
7. In Mouza Hironmoypur Deshapran Agricultural farm of Sri Amiya Maity has 2,500 bighas and other owners about 1,500 bighas lying fallow.
8. In different Mouzas of P.S. Canning Zemindar Sri Nibaran Chandra Bag has got 30,000 bighas of land most of which have been recorded as fisheries though actually they are not fisheries.
9. Three sons of Hazi Erajtulla Mallick of Jalalsingh, have got in Mouzas Ranibada, Hingsakhali J.L. No. 123, Kahitan Nos. 149 and 150; Parankheko Kaitan No. 124 and 197; Uttar Augad Road Khaitan No. 112 – 1,200 bighas of land lying falliow.

10. On the East side of Ghutiarisariff Md. Kudrus and Hanif two up-country Muslims owned 1,100 bighas of good land which has been acquired by Government. In the same area Sri Kshitish Mukherjee has got 800 bighas of good land. Besides these lands 669 baenamas for 9.5 bighas of lands for each for total of 6356 bighas of land in Mouzas Hironmoypur, Parbatipur, Maukhali-Jharkhali, Naskarpur and Shamporpur are pending for long, for which separate letters have been addressed to the Chief Minister, Rehabilitation Minister and the Zonal officer.

SANDESHKHALI POLICE STATION

1. In Mouza Marichjhpi about 50,000 bighas of land lying fallow, some covered with thin jungles under the Khas possession of the Government.
2. In Mouzas Gajalia and Kamakhyapur about 18,000 bighas of fallow land owned by Mafijaddin and Arshedali Jamader of P.S. Haroa who are commonly called Chutkia Zemindar.
3. In Rajpariand and other other Mouzas Dri Bhaban Mohan Das and others of Hatgacha union have got 7,000 bighas of land under the Sarbaria Kachhari whose manager is Sri Khagen Ghosh. Another Bhuban Mohan Das and others of Hatgacha have got about 30,000 bighas of land in Hatgacha and other Mouzas.

HAROA POLICE STATION

1. In Mouza Ranigachi D.P. Bhattacharjee of 3, Palit Street, Calcutta, has got 650 bighas of good land even after he has sold 310 bighas to refugees and offered 153 bighas to Government for refugees rehabilitation.
2. In 4 lats namely Goberi Lat, Sonatola Lat, Ramjoygheri Lat and Mustigeri Lat Nos. 70, 71, 72 &81 about 80,000 bighas of land recorded as fisheries but actually are actually lands flooded with water by raising high embankment around them.

BARAIPUR POLICE STATION

1. On the South of Uttarbhag Pumping Pumping Station there is a Char land known as Baghamari Char about 3 miles in length and ½ mile in breadth, but known as river in the map. This land is fit for cultivation and local Hindu people are in favour of distribution of the land among refugees.

HABRA POLICE STATION

1. "Nanglar Beel" – about 26,000 bighas of land fit for paddy cultivation and other vegetables.
2. Asrafabad Camp has got 600 bighas of cultivable land.

GAIGHAT POLICE STATION

1. In Mouzas Tangra and Shergarh of about 1500 bighas of land about 400 bighas which are high land suitable for homestead and the rest for cultivation.

BARRACKPUR SUB-DIVISION

1. Near Shyamnagar a big Beel known as Bartir Beel contains thousands of bighas of low land fit for paddy cultivation.

BAGDAH POLICE STATION

1. Hundreds of bighas of low land are available in the border area, some of which have been acquired by the Government.

Murshidabad District

KANDI SUB-DIVISION – BHARATPUR P.S.

1. In Mouza Amla Syed Kashemali Mirza and 12 other co-sharers have got 347 acres of good land for paddy cultivation. The Mirzas and others are willing to give it to about 100 farmer refugee families who have already apllied for the land and the case is pending since 22-8-56.
2. Mauza Ghoshpara, Khaitan No. 543 Zamindar Shri Sibcharan Dey and others have got 600 bighas of land. Shri Sunil Kumar and others of village Pastubi have got 130 bighas of land.
3. Shri Amarendra Nath Chatterjee and Shri tara Thakurtha and others have got 700 bighas.
4. Birla's company has got hundreds of bighas of land.

LALBAG P.S.

1. In Mauza Haribhanga – 250 bighas and in Mauza Daltabazar 300 bighas. Near Amimganj Birnagar Beel 300 bighas. Shri Gokul Kundu of Jiaganj and Shri Sudhir Chakraborty of Banipur, Jiaganj have got in Kusumkhola Moauza about 1200 bighas, Shri Gobinda Choudhury and Ram Choudhury of Berhampur have got 1500 bighas of land in Nayalaksha area. Shri Sreemanta Darker of Bamunia has got 500 bighas.

BHAGABANGOLA P.S.

1. Siddik Miah has 1200 bighas, Narayan Dutta of Lalbag has 900 bighas.
2. Madan Babu of Lalbag has 1800 bighas.

HARIPUR P.S.

1. Shri Deben Mullick has got 2000 bighas.
2. The large area on the North of Pallasy Math contains about 5000 bighas of cultivable land.
3. The vast field stretching from Murshidabad to Beldanga, known as "Katantarer Math" conatins about 50,000 bighas of good land.

BHARAMPUR P.S

1. In Mauza Rajdharpara J.L. No. 73 Mauza Purbanarayanpur J.L. No. 74, Bewlia Beel contains about 1,000 bighas of good land.
2. In Mauza Tarakpur J.L. No. 78 and J.L. no. 77 Chandar Beel contains 1800 bighas.
3. In Mauza Ajodhanagar J.L. No. 89 and Chaltia J.L. No. 81 – Chaltin Beel contains 600 bighas.

Nadia district

TEHATTA POLICE STATION

1. In Mauza Betai a big field known as Kharermath contains about 3000 bighas of land; one Sudhir Kumar Dutta has started an agricultural farm there.

2. In Mauza Bhetupara Gouri Beel contains 700 bighas of land whose owner is Shri Rabindra Nath Biswas of Sutharpara, Krishnanagar and Mahishmari Beel of Elomish Mallick Estate contains 130 bighas of land fit for paddy cultivation.
3. In Mauza of village Benode Nagar local people are prepared to sell 1000 bighas to refugee. Balarampur 500 bighas are available. Mirgi 500 bighas and Khaujapur about 300 bighas are available. Besides, in Mauzas Lalbanar, Betai, and Jitpur about 600 bighas of land owned by refugees by purchase are covered by bainanama to 60 families, pending for 5 months.

KARIMPUR POLICE STATION

1. In Unions Gopalpur, Nandanpur and Kathalia about 2000 bighas of good land are available.
2. On East and West sides of village Mahishbathan in Guabari, Dighalkandi, Routhbari and Zaipur villages or Mouzas about 2,000 bighas of good land remain uncultivated. These lands are on the verge of border line.

HARINGHATA P.S.

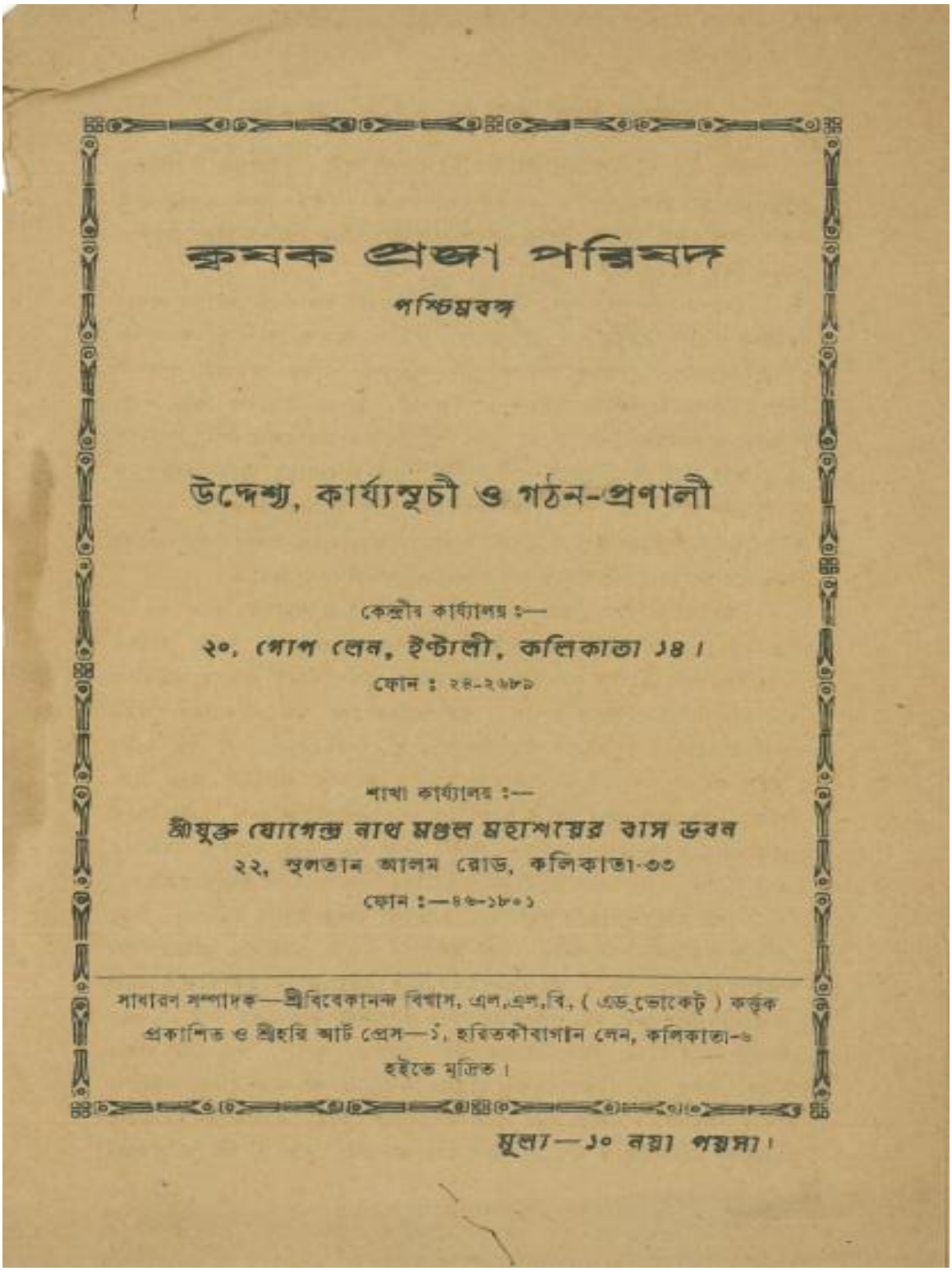
1. Large tracts of lands remain fallow which are fit for cultivation.

It is a known fact that a large number of bainanamas for lands in Nadia are pending for a long time.

***Source**: This list was attached to the memorandum sent to Chief Minister, B.C. Roy on January 15, 1959 by the Purba Bharat Bastuhara Samsad. The Memorandum is published in Mahapran Jogendranath, Vol. 6, pp. 61- 75. The list produced here is unamended.*

Appendix - III

Manifesto of *Krishak Praja Parishad*



কৃষক প্রজা পরিষদ

পশ্চিমবঙ্গ

উদ্দেশ্য, কার্য্যসূচী ও গঠন-প্রণালী

কেন্দ্রীয় কার্য্যালয় :—

২০, গোপ লেন, ইণ্টালী, কলিকাতা ১৪।

ফোন : ২৪-২৬৮৯

শাখা কার্য্যালয় :—

শ্রীযুক্ত যোগেন্দ্র নাথ মণ্ডল মহাশয়ের বাস ভবন

২২, সুলতান আলম রোড, কলিকাতা-৩৩

ফোন :—৪৬-১৮০১

সাধারণ সম্পাদক—শ্রীবিবেকানন্দ বিশ্বাস, এল,এল,বি, (এড্‌ভোকেট্‌) কর্ত্তৃক প্রকাশিত ও শ্রীহরি আর্ট প্রেস—১, হরিতকীবাগান লেন, কলিকাতা-৬ হইতে মুদ্রিত।

মূল্য—১০ নয়া পয়সা।

কৃষক প্রজা পরিষদ গঠনের উদ্দেশ্য

দীর্ঘ চতুর্দশ বৎসর অতিবাহিত হইল দেশ স্বাধীন হইয়াছে। দেশের বিভিন্ন ক্ষেত্রে উন্নয়ন মূলক প্রচেষ্টাও চলিতেছে। কিন্তু ভারত একটী কৃষি প্রধান দেশ হওয়া সত্ত্বেও ইহার কৃষক ও কৃষি কার্য্যের উন্নতির জন্য সরকার তেমন কিছু করেন নাই।

দেশের জনসাধারণের, বিশেষতঃ পল্লীবাসী জনগণের আর্থিক অবস্থা দিনদিন খারাপ হইতেছে। কৃষকদের আর্থিক অবস্থা ক্রমান্বয়ে অবনতির দিকে চলিতেছে। কৃষক ব্যতীত পল্লী অঞ্চলের বিভিন্ন বৃত্তিধারী সম্প্রদায় সমূহের, যথা—মৎস্যজীবি, তন্তুবায় বা তাঁতশিল্পী, সূতার মিস্ত্রী বা কাষ্ঠ শিল্পী, শাঁখারী বা শঙ্খ শিল্পী, কাঁসারী বা কংশ শিল্পী, কর্ম্মকার বা লৌহ শিল্পী, কুম্ভকার বা মৃৎশিল্পী, মুচী ও চর্ম্মকার বা চর্ম্মশিল্পীগণের ব্যবসায়ের প্রতি সরকারের ঔদাসীন্যের ফলে এই সম্প্রদায়ের লোকজন চরম আর্থিক সংকটের সম্মুখীন হইতেছে। গোচারণ ভূমি ও খাদ্যের অভাবে বাঙ্গালার গো-সম্পদ সম্পূর্ণ ধ্বংসের পথে যাওয়ার ফলে পশ্চিম বঙ্গে দুগ্ধের ভয়ানক অভাব দেখা দিয়াছে।

জলসেচের অভাব, বন্যা, জল-প্লাবন, অতিবৃষ্টি ও অনাবৃষ্টির ফলে কখনও লক্ষ লক্ষ একর জমিতে ফসল ফলাইতে না পারায়, কখনও বা কঠিন পরিশ্রম ও বহু অর্থ ব্যয়ে রোপিত লক্ষ লক্ষ একর জমির ফসল বিনষ্ট হওয়ায় কৃষককুল দারুণ দৈন্য দশায় পতিত হইতেছে। ইহা প্রতিকারের জন্য সরকারের তেমন কোন প্রচেষ্টা নাই। সংবাদ পত্রে প্রকাশ, গত বৎসর সেচকার্য্যের জন্য প্রদত্ত কেন্দ্রীয় অর্থ খরচ করিতে না পারায় পশ্চিম বঙ্গ সরকার আটত্রিশ লক্ষ টাকা কেন্দ্রে ফেরৎ দিয়াছেন। ডিষ্ট্রীক্ট ও ব্লক ডেভেলপমেন্ট অফিসারগণ গ্রামীন উন্নয়ন মূলক কার্য্যে বরাদ্দ কৃত অর্থ ব্যয় না করিয়া লক্ষ লক্ষ টাকা রাজ্য কোষাগারে ফেরৎ পাঠায়। ইহা অপেক্ষা নিষ্ঠুর পরিহাসের বিষয় আর কি হইতে পারে?

পল্লী অঞ্চলের উন্নয়ন মূলক কার্য্যের বিস্তৃত ক্ষেত্র পড়িয়া রহিয়াছে, কিন্তু সেদিকে কর্তৃপক্ষের দৃষ্টি নাই। বন্যা, জলপ্লাবন প্রভৃতি প্রাকৃতিক দুর্য্যোগে বহু অঞ্চলের জনগণের গৃহাদি সহ ফসলাদি বিনষ্ট হইয়াছে ও হইতেছে। এই সব দুর্য্যোগ নিবারণের জন্য সরকারের কোন কার্য্যকরী পরিকল্পনা নাই। প্রায় ক্ষেত্রেই গৃহ-হীনদের গৃহ নির্ম্মাণের জন্য কোনরূপ সাহায্য করা হয় নাই। যে সব ক্ষেত্রে গৃহ নির্ম্মাণের জন্য সামান্য কিছু টাকা ঋণ বাবদ দেওয়া হইয়াছে তাহাও আদায় করিবার জন্য সরকার নোটীশ জারী করিতেছেন। গ্রাম্য মহাজনের নিকট হইতে অত্যধিক চড়া সুদে কর্জ্জ গ্রহণ করিতে অসমর্থ হওয়ায়

এবং সরকারের নিকট হইতে কৃষি ঋণ না পাওয়ায় বহু কৃষক জমিতে ফসল উৎপন্ন করিতে পারে না। গ্রাম্য কৃষি ঋণদানের কোন ব্যবস্থাই সরকার এ পর্য্যন্ত করেন নাই। ভারতের কৃষককুল তথা পল্লীবাসীর একটি বৃহৎ অংশ আজও অন্নহীন বস্ত্রহীন, গৃহহীন এবং স্বাস্থ্যহীন অবস্থায়ই আছে। শিক্ষার কথা না হয় নাই তুলিলাম। প্রধানতঃ গরীবের চিকিৎসার জন্যই দাতব্য চিকিৎসালয় ও হাসপাতাল কিন্তু পল্লীর দরিদ্র জনগণ ইহার কিছুমাত্র সুবিধা পায় না। পল্লী অঞ্চলের বেকারগণের কর্ম্ম সংস্থানের কোন ব্যবস্থাই নাই। পল্লীবাসীর আর্থিক অবস্থার উন্নয়ন ও কর্ম্মসংস্থানের জন্য পল্লী অঞ্চলে ক্ষুদ্র শিল্প ও কুটীর শিল্পের ব্যাপক প্রতিষ্ঠার পরিকল্পনা সরকারের কাগজ পত্রেই সীমাবদ্ধ রহিয়া গিয়াছে। পশ্চিমবঙ্গে বেকার সমস্যা ভয়াবহ রূপে দেখা দিয়াছে। সকল জিনিষের দুর্ম্মূল্য, তদুপরি ট্যাক্সের পর ট্যাক্স বৃদ্ধির বোঝা জনগণের পক্ষে দুর্ব্বিসহ হইয়া উঠিয়াছে।

ক্ষুদ্রায়তন ও জনবহুল পশ্চিমবঙ্গ বর্ত্তমানে নানাবিধ সমস্যায় জর্জ্জরিত। দেশ বিভক্ত হওয়ার ইতিপূর্ব্বেই প্রায় ৫০ লক্ষ নরনারী বাস্তুহারা হইয়া পূর্ব্ববঙ্গ হইতে পশ্চিমবঙ্গে চলিয়া আসিয়াছে। তাহাদের অধিকাংশেরই অর্থ-নৈতিক পুনর্বাসন আজ পর্য্যন্ত হয় নাই। পশ্চিমবঙ্গের আশ্রয় শিবিরগুলিতে এখনও প্রায় একলক্ষ উদ্বাস্তু পুনর্বাসনের প্রতিক্ষায় দিন গনিতেছে। এই অবস্থার উপর আবার ভারতেরই একটী রাজ্য আসাম হইতে বিতাড়িত হইয়া প্রায় চল্লিশ হাজার বাঙ্গালী নরনারী পশ্চিমবঙ্গে চলিয়া আসিয়াছে। সম্প্রতি জলপাইগুড়ি জেলার বেরুবাড়ী ইউনিয়নের অর্দ্ধেক পাকিস্থানকে ছাড়িয়া দেওয়ার ফলে পুরাতন বাসিন্দাসহ কয়েক হাজার লোক পুনরায় উদ্বাস্তু হইবে। এইরূপ নিত্য নূতন সমস্যায় পশ্চিমবঙ্গের জনজীবন দুর্ব্বিসহ হইয়া উঠিয়াছে। এরূপ অবস্থা আর বরদাস্ত করা কোন মতেই সম্ভব নহে। পশ্চিমবঙ্গ বর্ত্তমানে বড়ই নিঃসহায়; বাঙ্গালী আজ চরম সঙ্কটের সম্মুখীন। আপন ঘরে বাঙ্গালী পরবাসীর অবস্থায় পৌঁছিয়াছে। যত সব বড় বড় শিল্প ও কলকারখানা স্থাপিত হইয়াছে এবং হইতেছে তাহাতে বাঙ্গালীর চাকুরী মেলে না। এরূপ দুঃসহ অবস্থা আর বেশীদিন চলিতে পারে না। দেশবাসীর সমবেত চেষ্টায় ইহার প্রতিকার করিতেই হইবে।

দেশের সামগ্রিক উন্নতির জন্য গ্রামীন অর্থ নৈতিক উন্নয়ন (development of rural economy) তথা কৃষক ও কৃষি কার্য্যের উন্নয়ন যে একান্ত

অপরিহার্য্য সে বিষয় কোন দ্বিমত থাকিতে পারে না। অথচ এ সম্পর্কে সরকারের উদাসীনতা ও ব্যর্থতা বিশেষ ভাবে পরিলক্ষিত হইতেছে। দুঃখের বিষয় রাজনৈতিক দলসমূহও এ সম্পর্কে নীরব ও নিষ্ক্রিয় বলিয়া মনে হয়।

পল্লীবাসীগণ যতদিন পর্য্যন্ত তাহাদের অধিকার, ন্যায্য দাবী ও শক্তি সম্পর্কে সচেতন না হইবে এবং সেই গণচেতনা নিয়ে সঙ্ঘবদ্ধ না হইবে ততদিন পর্য্যন্ত তাহাদের প্রকৃত কল্যাণের জন্য সরকার তেমন কিছুই করিবে না। সে যে সরকারই আসুক। গণতন্ত্র রাষ্ট্রের সার্ব্বভৌম শক্তি জনসাধারণের মধ্যে নিহিত। গত চৌদ্দ বৎসরে সে সম্বন্ধে গণচেতনা জাগ্রত করার কোন চেষ্টা হয় নাই। বিঘা কয়েক জমি এবং পৈত্রিক পর্ণ কুটির ছাড়িয়ে ভারতের দরিদ্র কৃষক, মেহনতী জনতা এবং মধ্যবিত্ত গৃহস্থের অধিকার যে ভারত ভূমির শেষ প্রান্ত পর্য্যন্ত প্রসারিত এ বোধ আজও জাগে নাই। তারা আজও নিজেদের করদ প্রজা বলিয়া মনে করে। বস্তুত গণদেবতা জাগুক ইহা কোন শাসকগোষ্ঠী চাহে না। গণদেবতাকে জাগ্রত করিতে তাহারা ভয় পায়। দুর্বল নেতৃত্ব নাবালক জাতির অভিভাবকরূপে কাজ করিয়া আত্মতৃপ্তি লাভ করে। সেখানে ক্ষমতা লাভের দ্বন্দ্ব এবং তার জন্য নানা ফন্দি ফিকির প্রবল হইয়া ওঠে। শাসন যন্ত্রের মাথায় চড়িয়া বসে নানা মিথ্যার পালিশে উজ্জ্বল করা অন্যায় এবং অবিচার। জাতি যে তিমিরে সেই তিমিরেই পড়িয়া থাকে। ভোটের আগ্রহে যাহারা ভোট দাতার কুটীর দ্বারে উপস্থিত হন তাহারা যেন তেন প্রকারেণ ভোট সংগ্রহের জন্যই ব্যস্ত থাকেন। সেটা টাকার খেলা। সেখানে বিবিধ অজুহাতে ভোট কেনা বেচারই খেলা চলে। একটা সত্য ও মিথ্যার ধূম্রজাল সৃষ্টি করা হয়। কত বড় বড় প্রতিশ্রুতি, ভোটদাতাগণের প্রতি কত দরদ! কিন্তু ভোট পর্ব্ব শেষ হওয়ার পরে আর পাঁচ বৎসরের মধ্যে নির্ব্বাচিত এম, এল, এ, গণের সাক্ষাৎ মেলে না। বিশেষতঃ গ্রাম্য এলাকা হইতে কৃষক শ্রমিক ও অন্যান্য পল্লীবাসীদের ভোটে যাঁহারা নির্ব্বাচিত হন তাঁহারা পল্লীবাসীর স্বার্থের প্রতি সরকারের ন্যায়ই উদাসীন এবং কর্ত্তব্য বিমুখ। পল্লীবাসীর স্বার্থ-সংরক্ষণ ও বর্দ্ধনে তাহাদের কোন প্রচেষ্টাই নাই। পল্লীবাসীগণের সঙ্ঘবদ্ধ প্রচেষ্টার দ্বারা এই অবস্থার যথোচিত প্রতিকার আবশ্যক।

উল্লিখিত সমস্ত বিষয় গভীর ভাবে চিন্তা করিয়া, গ্রামীন অর্থ নৈতিক উন্নয়ন তথা কৃষক ও কৃষিকার্য্যের এবং সম্প্রদায়গত ব্যবসা প্রভৃতির উন্নতি সাধনের উদ্দেশ্য লইয়া বিগত ১০ই ডিসেম্বর কলিকাতাস্থ মহাবোধি সোসাইটি

হলে এডভোকেট শ্রীযুক্ত শরৎ চন্দ্র জানা মহাশয়ের সভাপতিত্বে অনুষ্ঠিত পশ্চিমবঙ্গ কৃষক প্রজা সম্মেলনে "**কৃষক প্রজা পরিষদ**" নামে একটী সামাজিক ও অর্থনৈতিক (Socio-economic) সংস্থা গঠিত হইয়াছে। ইহা দেশের অন্যান্য রাজনৈতিক দল নিরপেক্ষ একটী স্বাধীন সংস্থা। উক্ত সংস্থার কর্ম্মসূচী ও সংক্ষিপ্ত গঠনপ্রণালী এতৎসহ প্রকাশিত হইল। আমাদের দৃঢ় বিশ্বাস এই কার্য্যসূচীর ভিত্তিতে **কৃষক প্রজা পরিষদের** মাধ্যমে উন্নয়ন মূলক কার্য্যে অগ্রসর হইলে পল্লীর জনগণ সহ কৃষককুলের বিশেষ কল্যাণ সাধিত হইতে পারে। অতএব বিভিন্ন জেলা, মহকুমা, থানা ও ইউনিয়ন ও গ্রামে "**কৃষক প্রজা পরিষদের**" শাখা সমূহ গঠন করার কার্য্যে ব্রতী হইবার জন্য আমরা পল্লীবাসীসহ কৃষক কুলের কল্যাণ কামী, সমাজ দরদী নেতৃ-বৃন্দের, বিশেষতঃ গ্রামীন ও কৃষক সমাজের নেতৃ স্থানীয় ব্যক্তি ও কর্ম্মিবৃন্দের প্রতি আবেদন জানাইতেছি। ইতি—২২।৩।৬১

আবেদনকারী—

১। শ্রীশরৎচন্দ্র জানা, সিনিয়র এডভোকেট, সভাপতি।
২। ,, যোগেন্দ্রনাথ মণ্ডল, প্রাক্তন আইন-মন্ত্রী, ভারত ও পাকিস্তান, কার্য্যকরী সভাপতি।
৩। ,, মুকুন্দবিহারী মল্লিক, সিনিয়র এডভোকেট, সহ-সভাপতি
৪। ,, রামপদ বিশ্বাস, রাণাঘাট, ,,
৫। ,, বিদ্যুৎকুমার বিশ্বাস, সম্পাদক, ভারতরাষ্ট্র পত্রিকা, ,,
৬। ,, আশুতোষ ঘোষ, সম্পাদক, যাদব কেশরী পত্রিকা, ,,
৭। ,, আশুতোষ দাস, এডভোকেট, কোষাধ্যক্ষ।
৮। ,, বিবেকানন্দ বিশ্বাস, এডভোকেট, সাধারণ সম্পাদক, কৃষক প্রজা পরিষদ।

বিঃ দ্রঃ—কৃষক প্রজা পরিষদ সম্পর্কে কোন কিছু জানিতে হইলে শ্রীবিবেকানন্দ বিশ্বাস, সাধারণ সম্পাদক, ২০, গোপ লেন, ইণ্টালী কলিকাতা-১৪ এর সহিত যোগাযোগ করুন।

কৃষক প্রজা পরিষদের কর্ম্মসূচী Programme)

গ্রামীন অর্থ নৈতিক ও সামাজিক উন্নতি সাধনই পরিষদের প্রধান লক্ষ্য। সেই লক্ষ্যে পৌছিবার জন্য কৃষক প্রজা পরিষদ নিম্নোক্ত কার্য্যসূচী গ্রহণ করিয়াছে।

১। জাতিবর্ণ নির্বিশেষে সকল শ্রেণীর কৃষিজীবি, কৃষি শ্রমিক বৃত্তিধারী সম্প্রদায় সমূহ এবং পল্লীবাসী জনগণকে কৃষক প্রজা-পরিষদের মাধ্যমে সংঘবদ্ধ করা।

২। সকল শ্রেণীর ও সর্বস্তরের লোকেরা যাহাতে সামাজিক ও অর্থনৈতিক সুবিচার পাইতে পারে তাহার প্রচেষ্টা করা এবং সকল শ্রেণীর কৃষক ও জনগণের মধ্যে সদ্ভাব ও সম্প্রীতি প্রতিষ্ঠা দ্বারা সর্বপ্রকার সাম্প্রদায়িক মনোভাব বর্জন করিতে জনগণকে উদ্বুদ্ধ করা।

৩। কৃষকগণ যাহাতে সময়মত প্রয়োজনীয় কৃষিঋণ, ভাল বীজ ও জমির সার সংগ্রহ করিতে পারে তাহার সাহায্য করা।

৪। জল-প্লাবন, বন্যা অতিবৃষ্টি ও অনাবৃষ্টি প্রভৃতি প্রাকৃতিক দুর্যোগে ফসল হানী ঘটিলে ক্ষতিগ্রস্থ কৃষকগণ যাহাতে খাজনা মকুব ও সাহায্য পাইতে পারে তাহার ব্যবস্থা করা।

৫। ক্ষুদ্র ক্ষুদ্র সেচ পরিকল্পনা দ্বারা জমিতে জলসেচের ব্যবস্থা করিতে এবং বিলাঞ্চল ও নীচু জমির জল নিকাশের ব্যবস্থা করিতে সরকারকে মনোযোগী ও সক্রিয় করিয়া তোলা।

৬। গোচারণ ভূমি সংরক্ষণ, গো-সম্পদ বৃদ্ধি, পশু পালন ও পোল্ট্রী প্রভৃতি সংরক্ষণ ও বৃদ্ধি কল্পে সরকার যাহাতে কার্য্যকরী পরিকল্পনা গ্রহণ করে তাহার ব্যবস্থা করা।

৭। বিভিন্ন বৃত্তিধারী সম্প্রদায় সমূহের, যথা—মৎস্য জীবি, তন্তুবায় বা তাঁতশিল্পী ছুতার মিস্ত্রী বা কাষ্ঠ শিল্পী, কাঁসারী বা কংশ শিল্পী, শাঁখারী বা শঙ্খ শিল্পী কর্ম্মকার বা লৌহশিল্পী, কুম্ভকার বা মৃৎশিল্পী, মুচী ও চর্ম্মকার বা চর্ম্মশিল্পী প্রভৃতি সম্প্রদায়ের সাম্প্রদায়িক ব্যবসায়ের উন্নতি ও উৎকর্ষ সাধনে সরকার যাহাতে কার্য্যকরী পন্থা অবলম্বন করে তাহার ব্যবস্থা করা।

৮। পল্লী অঞ্চলে, হাটে বাজারে ও ছোট ছোট সহরে যে সব ক্ষুদ্র ব্যবসায়ী ব্যবসা করেন তাহাদের উপর কোন অন্যায় জবরদস্তি না হয় এবং প্রয়োজন হইলে তাহারা যাহাতে সরকারী সাহায্য পাইতে পারেন তাহার ব্যবস্থা করা।

৯। পল্লী অঞ্চলে রাস্তাঘাট নির্মাণ, বিদ্যালয় ও দাতব্য চিকিৎসালয় স্থাপন ও পানীয় জল সরবরাহের কার্যে সরকার যাহাতে অধিকতর উদ্যোগী ও সক্রিয় হয় তাহার চেষ্টা করা।

১০। পশ্চিমবঙ্গে সরকারের খাস জমি ও চাষযোগ্য অনাবাদী জমির উন্নয়ন করিয়া সরকার যাহাতে স্থানীয় গরীব ও ভূমিহীন কৃষক ও বাস্তুহারাগণের মধ্যে বণ্টন করে তাহার ব্যবস্থা করা এবং আংশিক পুনর্বাসন প্রাপ্ত গরীব উদ্বাস্তুগণের সম্পূর্ণ পুনর্বাসনের ব্যবস্থা করা।

১১। উচিৎ মূল্যে খাদ্য বণ্টনের ব্যাপারে সরকার যাহাতে সহরবাসীর পর্য্যায়ে পল্লীবাসীর প্রতি সুবিচার করে তাহার ব্যবস্থা করা।

১২। ভারতীয় সংবিধান ও সরকারী ঘোষণানুসারে অনগ্রসর জাতি, তপশীল জাতি ও উপজাতি এবং আদিবাসিগণের জন্য যে সব বিশেষ সুযোগসুবিধা সংরক্ষিত আছে তাহারা যাহাতে সেই সব ঠিক ঠিক মত পায় তাহার ব্যবস্থা করা।

১৩। পল্লী অঞ্চলে যে সব সরকারী কর্মচারী কর্তব্যে নিযুক্ত আছেন, যথা—প্রাইমারী বিদ্যালয়ের শিক্ষক, শিক্ষিকা, ইউনিয়ন এগ্রিকাল্‌চারাল্ এসিষ্টাণ্ট, গ্রাম সেবক ও সেবিকা প্রভৃতি, তাঁহারা যাহাতে যথিত হারে বেতন পান তাহার চেষ্টা করা এবং পল্লী অঞ্চলে মাধ্যমিক ও উচ্চ বিদ্যালয়ের শিক্ষকগণের বেতন বৃদ্ধির ব্যবস্থা করা।

১৪। পল্লীবাসীর আর্থিক উন্নয়নে ও পল্লীর বেকার সমস্যা সমাধানের জন্য সরকার যাহাতে পল্লী অঞ্চলে ক্ষুদ্রশিল্প ও কুটীর শিল্পের ব্যাপক প্রতিষ্ঠা করে তাহার ব্যবস্থা করা এবং শ্রমিকদের অবস্থার উন্নতি সাধন করা।

১৫। কৃষকগণ যাহাতে তাঁহাদের উৎপন্ন ফসলের লাভজনক মূল্য পায় তজ্জন্য কৃষিজাত দ্রব্যের সর্বনিম্ন দর সরকার কর্তৃক বাঁধিয়া দেওয়ার ব্যবস্থা করা এবং নিত্য প্রয়োজনীয় জিনিষের সর্বোচ্চ মূল্য এমন ভাবে নিরূপন করা যাহাতে গরীব জন-সাধারণের ক্রয় ক্ষমতার বাহিরে চলিয়া না যায়।

১৬। খাদ্য সামগ্রী ও ঔষধাদিতে ভেজাল দেওয়া বন্ধ করা।

১৭। সরকারী কৃষিঋণ, দুস্থদের গৃহ-নির্মাণ ঋণ ও তন্তুবায় প্রভৃতির ব্যবসায় ঋণ যাহাতে সম্পূর্ণ মকুব হয় তাহার চেষ্টা করা

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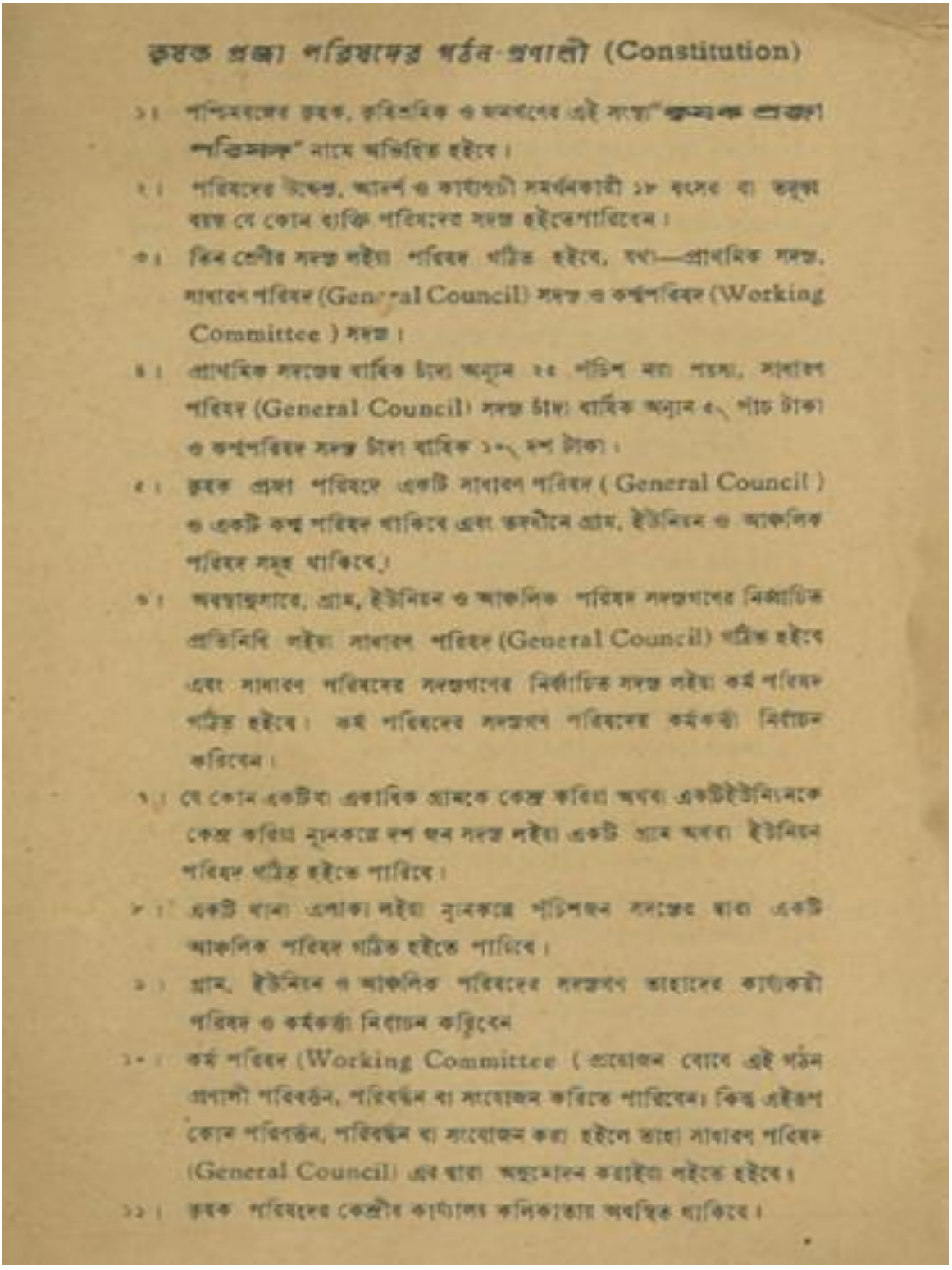


কৃষক প্রজা পরিষদের গঠন-প্রণালী (Constitution)

১। পশ্চিমবঙ্গের কৃষক, কৃষিশ্রমিক ও জনগণের এই সংস্থা "কৃষক প্রজা পরিষদ" নামে অভিহিত হইবে।

২। পরিষদের উদ্দেশ্য, আদর্শ ও কার্যসূচী সমর্থনকারী ১৮ বৎসর বা তদূর্ধ্ব বয়স্ক যে কোন ব্যক্তি পরিষদের সদস্য হইতেপারিবেন।

৩। তিন শ্রেণীর সদস্য লইয়া পরিষদ গঠিত হইবে, যথা—প্রাথমিক সদস্য, সাধারণ পরিষদ (General Council) সদস্য ও কর্মপরিষদ (Working Committee) সদস্য।

৪। প্রাথমিক সদস্যের বার্ষিক চাঁদা অন্যূন ২৫ পঁচিশ নয়া পয়সা, সাধারণ পরিষদ (General Council) সদস্য চাঁদা বার্ষিক অন্যূন ৫৲ পাঁচ টাকা ও কর্মপরিষদ সদস্য চাঁদা বার্ষিক ১০৲ দশ টাকা।

৫। কৃষক প্রজা পরিষদে একটি সাধারণ পরিষদ (General Council) ও একটি কর্ম পরিষদ থাকিবে এবং তদধীনে গ্রাম, ইউনিয়ন ও আঞ্চলিক পরিষদ সমূহ থাকিবে।

৬। অবস্থানুসারে, গ্রাম, ইউনিয়ন ও আঞ্চলিক পরিষদ সদস্যগণের নির্বাচিত প্রতিনিধি লইয়া সাধারণ পরিষদ (General Council) গঠিত হইবে এবং সাধারণ পরিষদের সদস্যগণের নির্বাচিত সদস্য লইয়া কর্ম পরিষদ গঠিত হইবে। কর্ম পরিষদের সদস্যগণ পরিষদের কর্মকর্তা নির্বাচন করিবেন।

৭। যে কোন একটিমা একাধিক গ্রামকে কেন্দ্র করিয়া অথবা একটিইউনিয়নকে কেন্দ্র করিয়া ন্যূনকল্পে দশ জন সদস্য লইয়া একটি গ্রাম অথবা ইউনিয়ন পরিষদ গঠিত হইতে পারিবে।

৮। একটি থানা এলাকা লইয়া ন্যূনকল্পে পঁচিশজন সদস্যের দ্বারা একটি আঞ্চলিক পরিষদ গঠিত হইতে পারিবে।

৯। গ্রাম, ইউনিয়ন ও আঞ্চলিক পরিষদের সদস্যগণ তাহাদের কার্যকরী পরিষদ ও কর্মকর্তা নির্বাচন করিবেন

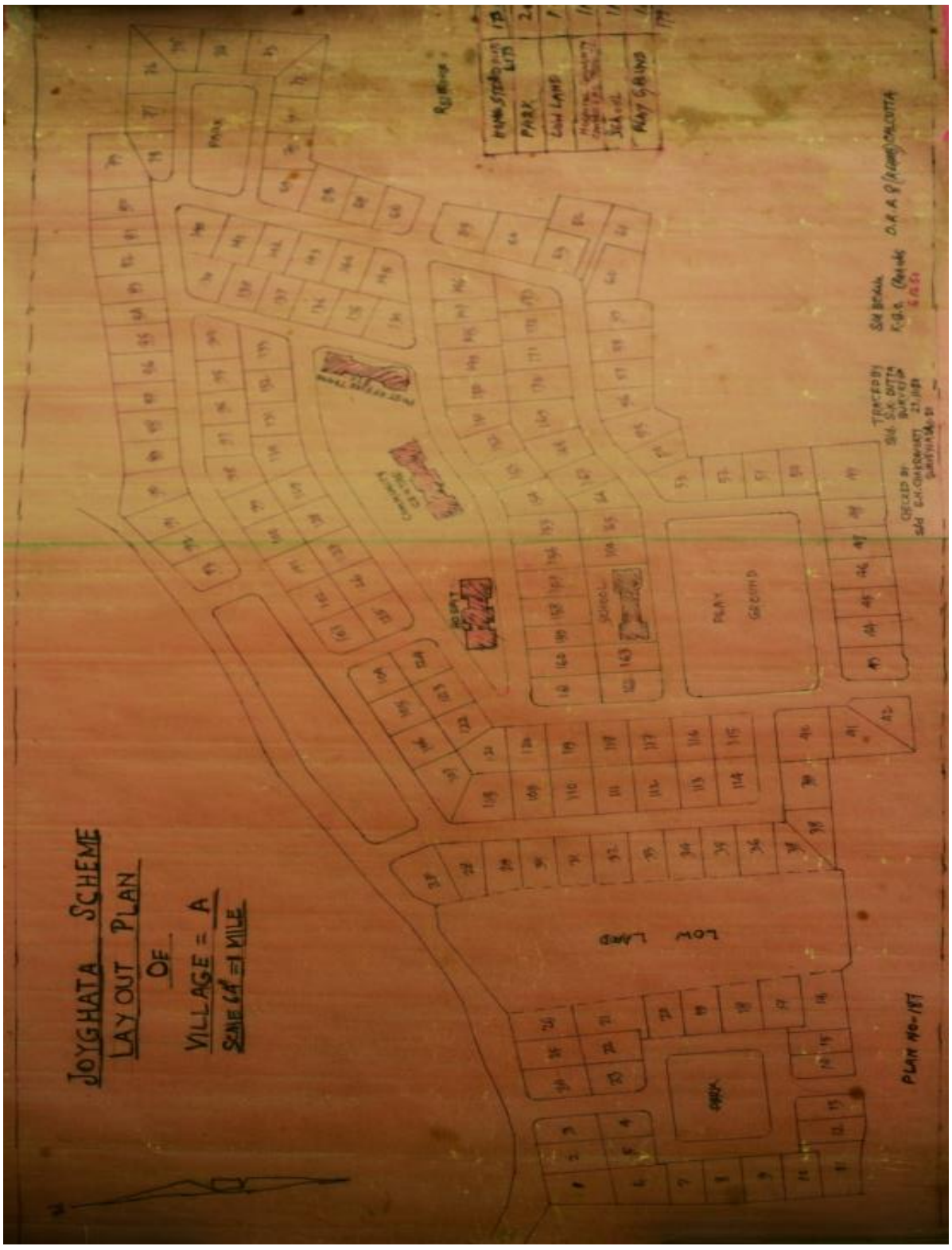
১০। কর্ম পরিষদ (Working Committee) প্রয়োজন বোধে এই গঠন প্রণালী পরিবর্তন, পরিবর্ধন বা সংযোজন করিতে পারিবেন। কিন্তু এইরূপ কোন পরিবর্তন, পরিবর্ধন বা সংযোজন করা হইলে তাহা সাধারণ পরিষদ (General Council) এর দ্বারা অনুমোদন করাইয়া লইতে হইবে।

১১। কৃষক পরিষদের কেন্দ্রীয় কার্যালয় কলিকাতায় অবস্থিত থাকিবে।

Source: *Shri Jagadish Chandra Mandal*

Appendix - IV

Original Layout Plan of Joyghata Scheme



Source: *Shri Kripa Sindhu Sarkar*

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