

# **Matua Development Board: A Historical Review of the United Movement of the Namasudras in Bengal**

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**Abstract:** *During almost every election, the political parties look at the various 'vote banks' and talk about giving different facilities to different castes and communities. In West Bengal, Namasudra, Rajbangshi and Paundra accept or assure their old claims to attract the Scheduled Castes. Based on that, the government of West Bengal has formed 'Namasudra Development Board', 'Matua Development Board', 'Rajbangshi Development Board' etc. in 2018. But whatever the politics of the vote bank behind this initiative of the government, the Namasudras have a history of forming a united organization. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the influence of the Matua movement, in particular, the efforts of Guruchand Thakur (1846-1937), led to the urge to form a central assembly of the Namasudras. As a result, in the pre-independence period, they played an important role in the politics of Bengal. This article will show that due to the organizational consciousness of the Matua and Namasudras and the large number of them, reverence for all political parties in West Bengal has recently increased.*

**Keywords:** Namasudra, Matua, Namasudra Development Board, Guruchand Thakur, Caste Identity, self-dignity.

On November 5, 2018, the West Bengal State Government formed two new 'Community Development Boards', one is 'Namasudra Development Board'(NDB) and 'Matua Development Board' (MDB). Before the announcement of this imitative, Chief Minister (CM) Mamata Banerjee has held several rounds of talks with the representatives of this community to improve the quality of the backward Matuas and Namasudras as well. Finally, at the cabinet meeting on November 5, the issue of the formation of a development board for the Namasudra community was sealed. About three crore Namasudras live in 14 districts of West Bengal. The lion's share of them belongs to the Matua community. CM Mamata sat down for a discussion with the representatives of the 'All India Namasudra Development Council'(AINDC) in the presence of six members of the cabinet, Arup Biswas, Gautam Dev, Rabindranath Ghosh, Binayakrishna Barman, Chandrima Bhattacharya and Indranil Sen. The meeting was attended by Mukul Chandra Bairagya, acting president of the central committee of the Development Council, and other office-bearers, led by Gopinath Das, a former minister from Assam, and 13 Namashudra representatives from the state. The meeting also discussed the issue of overall improvement of Namasudras, as well as the issue of deleting the names of 4 million Bengali speakers in Assam in the name of creating NRC. Mukul Chandra Bairagya had earlier submitted 40 deputations from 14 districts of the state for the overall upliftment of the Namasudra community. Opposition political parties claimed that looking at the vote, the West Bengal Government has formed the 'Namasudra Unnayan Parishad' and the 'Matua Unnayan Parishad'. But if we go back to the history of the Namasudra community, we can see a strong caste, protest and identity movement of Namasudra in colonial Bengal.<sup>1</sup> In East Bengal, during the pre-independence period, Namasudras has a tradition of developing consciousness, social awareness and building united organizations. In this article, an attempt will be made to present the history of the unity of Namasudras and the development of organizational strength.

According to Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das used to think that the word 'Deshbandhu' means 'Chandal'. These Chandals of Bengal are the true friends of all the peasants, workers and food producers of the country. But "insult without guilt given by the upper castes", the humiliation of the Namasudras, Chittaranjan Das felt 'like a shell sticking in his chest'.<sup>2</sup> That is why he wanted to go among the Namasudras of East Bengal for their development and used to feel their oppression. The period was before the election campaign as the leader of the '*Swarajya Dal*', just before the 1923 Bengal Pact, even during the Swadeshi movement, when Ashwani Kumar Dutta failed to attract the attention of Guruchand Thakur and other Namasudra leaders, responded to the plea of Chittaranjan Das, saying that 'for the lower caste peasants, freedom meant poverty, infirmity and poverty. They will take part in the politics of the *Swarajya party* only if they leave the city and come to the village and call them tender brothers. He has demanded the respect and dignity of the upper castes towards the lower castes.<sup>3</sup> While he was alive, he called out to the Namasudras and said to them 'wake up, you are not small, be strong and united with strength in self-identity, shine in the power of daily worldly action and education'.<sup>4</sup> In 1938, on the first death anniversary of Guruchand Thakur in Calcutta, Subhash Chandra Bose appeared in person and regarded Guruchand Tagore as the "superman" and the rejuvenator of Hindu society".<sup>5</sup> Since then, Guruchand Thakur's grandson Pramatha Ranjan Thakur (Barma's husband) has been with the Congress (sometimes apart from the Bengali Congress) in the independence movement with the Matua-Namasudras. Even after independence and the partition of Bengal, the Namasudras, under the leadership of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur (P.R. Thakur), settled the refugees, educated the lower castes, economic development, bypassed Brahmanism in the ideals of the Matua religion, and built alternative equality and humanitarian society. After the demise of P.R. Thakur, his wife was holding the helm of self-dignity and self-respect of the Namasudra community all over India through the Matua Mahasangha.

The formation of the MDB in West Bengal or the political significance of Namasudras or Matua is not an accident. It has a social and organizational history long before the independence of India. In the early part of the twentieth century, they were still not 'Namasudras', living in the '*bils*' area (marshy lands) outside the village under the name 'Chandal', with temple doors closed to them, agricultural workers, literacy of only three percent. However, it is the largest indigenous people as '*ajalachal*' lower community in East Bengal.<sup>6</sup> The so-called 'Chandals' are socially hated by the upper caste Brahmin-Kayastha zamindars-Mahajan, were economically deprived. It was then that Guruchand Thakur's revelation of education reform, says that '*bachi kimba mori prane tate kshati nai, grame grame pathshala gore jete chai*'<sup>7</sup> (Living or dying, is no harm in that, we want to build schools in villages) and He often said that '*jar dal nai, tar bal nai*'<sup>8</sup> (Those who do not have a party do not have the strength) all shook the Hindu society of East Bengal. None of the mainstream social reformers could have imagined the ideal of his universal education. As a result, in 181, Ishwar Gain, the mother of Dattadanga, Khulna, presided over the shraddhanusthan of Namashudra representatives of 18 Parganas in their respective areas as the president. In 1872-73, the 'social boycott movement' of not working, cooking, farming, not going to the market at Nakra Haat, etc. lasted for about six months. Although their movement failed, they felt the need to unite in the future to gain self-respect and dignity among the Namasudras.<sup>9</sup> Guruchand's leadership in the Namasudra identity movement in the 1911 census showed signs of that unity. Sumit Sarkar said that the Namasudra identity formation was not just a function of census operation; it also had wider socio-economic and cultural dimensions.<sup>10</sup>

The Dhaka '*Namasudra Hitaishi Samiti*' was formed in 1902 under the presidency of Raghunath Sarkar and the 'All Bengal Namasudra Association' was formed in 1912 under the chairmanship of Mukunda Bihari Mallick. By 1928, it had a strong network in 22 districts of Bengal through its branches.<sup>11</sup> There was a committee in each village, a union with fifteen village committees, and a swamp committee with union shots. To raise funds, he would remove a handful of rice before cooking every day and submit it to the village committee in the month. The money earned from that was spent on village road development, construction of schools, the marriage of poor man's daughter, etc. In the interest of social development, Guruchand Thakur formed 'Namasudra Kalyan Samiti' out of a sense of responsibility. The existence of associations in almost every Namasudra village in Faridpur, Dhaka, Khulna, Bakherganj was well received with meetings. The program was multifaceted. It is noteworthy that the collective protest against the injustice done to the Namasudras is to resolve the mutual dispute through arbitration before going to court. Another sign of '*Atmasakti*' was that when they harvested paddy every year, they formed a '*Namasudra Welfare Fund*' by depositing one ounce or forty ounces of paddy. Poverty, famine, deprivation, this association was by their side. With the money deposited, harmoniums, saimanas, hanchaks, joydankas, large-sized pots and pans, etc. were bought for naming in kavigan or for wedding ceremonies.<sup>12</sup> In the case of '*Namasudra Gram Kalyan Samiti*' (NGKS), the dual goal of social cohesion and economic development was met, Matua Mahasangha, founded in 1932, and NGKS worked together. On the one hand, social development, where they did not get any help from the mainstream rural upper castes regarding the program. As a result, the association made them self-reliant. And the expectation of gaining united strength and respect was born from the neglect of the upper castes. On the other hand, *Namasankritann*, *Kavigan*, *Harisava*, *Hariyatra*, etc. were the catalysts of their cultural excellence.<sup>13</sup> The historical tradition of forming the Namasudras Development Association did not follow the path of 'Sanskritization'<sup>14</sup> theory of blindness of all the upper castes in India to rise above the lower castes of other states was an attempt to elevate the family, the village and the society into a prose land of equality and justice.

Between the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century, Guruchand Thakur preached the political awareness of the lower caste peasants at a peasant uplift meeting in Faridpur, Bakherganj, Khulna district and even in Midnapore. With the strong support of '*Namasudra Hitaishi Samiti*' and 'Bengal Namasudra Association', it was possible to set up separate dormitories for Namasudra students in Orakandi, Jhalakathi, Pirojpur and Barisal with a grant of nine and a half lakh rupees from the then British government. However, it should be kept in mind that even then there was no place for Namasudras or other lower castes in Hindu hostels. In 1918, when the Namasudra leadership launched a Dalhousie campaign demanding their development and representation in the legislature, nationalists hated Namasudra, as a bunch of idiots who were trying to jump all the top of the tree'.<sup>15</sup> They did not forget this insult and hated from the upper castes nationalists' political leaders. But instead of going into the direct protest, withdrawn their political support and moved silently from the Congress side. As a result, due to the lack of support from the lower castes Namasudra, Rajbanshi and Paundra, Congress had to move from the balcony the political power to form a government in Bengal.

Even before the Poona Pact (1932), at the Khulna Namasudra Conference in 1930, Guruchand Thakur demanded lower caste representation in education, employment and representation in legislation for backward castes. He said that 'emancipation of the lower castes and untouchables would be never accomplished unless and until they had a share of the political power'.<sup>16</sup> There was no recentness in this demand, there was a demand for the formation and development of the lower castes in protest of caste domination. Because before this, in the Tenancy Act of 1926 and the Primary Education Bill of 1929-30, all the upper caste representatives of the Legislative

Assembly took the side of the zamindars.<sup>17</sup> Due to the conservatism of the upper caste, the lower caste people of Bengal could not enter the mainstream politics, they were forced to move in a different direction. As a result, in the elections of 1938 and later in the formation of the government of Bengal, the Congress was forced to withdraw from the sphere of power. On the eve of the partition (1947 election), a large section of Namasudras supported the Congress, but knowing that the partition of Bengal would bring extreme horror to the future destiny of the nation, the Bengali entity was strangled to death in the interest of the *Bhadralok* Hindus (gentleman).<sup>18</sup> Immediately the strong united movement of the Namasudras came to an end. Matua leader P.R. Thakur despite being in the Congress continued to oppose the partition of Bengal and submitted a deputation to the boundary commission, but after Noakhali and Kumilla riots changed his views and began to support the Bengal partition. Finally, when, the Independence in 1947 along with the partition of Bengal.<sup>19</sup> It destroyed the strong unity and strength of the Namasudra caste movement. All the Districts where the Namasudras predominated went to East Pakistan, despite all the protestation of Namasudras. But during the decade of colonial period in Bengal politics caste identity and caste mobilizations got crucial protagonist placed 'hyper-visibility of caste'.<sup>20</sup> Namasudra leaders, Virat Mandal, Bhismadev Das, Rashiklal Biswas, Jogendranath Mandal, Mukunda Bihari Mallick and P. R. Thakur were elected in 1936 and 1946 only by the organizational strength of the Namasudras. After partition, they had to be separated from each other. Some were in East Bengal, some in impeccable camps, some in Andaman-Dandakaranya.<sup>21</sup> Although it is too late for the united organization to return to power, it is understood that the new generation has not forgotten the toxic past, even though it is too late for the united organization to return to power. If we listen to the speeches of the leaders of 'AIMBP', Mukul Bairagya, folk poet Asim Sarkar, Virat Bairagya, Nakul Mallick and Manoranjan Basu. Since 2012, the Development Council has quietly convened more than 200 meetings across Bengal. The Panchayat Block has given more than forty deputations to the Zila Parishad on the demand for the development of Namasudras and civil rights. Navanna has campaigned at the demand of the Development Board. One lakh and forty thousand memberships have been created and funds have been formed all over Bengal. It does not seem to be easy to ignore the power of this organized network and majority.

The majority and organizational unity of a larger population can be the bird's eye view of all political parties. But, the lower caste communities of Bengal have a caste-based tradition and history of strengthening their internal fabric which is the core consolidation of the Namasudras and Matua community. As a result, ineffective boastful assurances given by all political parties, do not seem to be able to attract the Matua-Namasudras or create divisions among them. The history of the Namasudras moving away from the support of the Left Party proves that historical fact. Since the 1930s, Guruchand Thakur has been preaching at the Matua-Namasudra Conference, calling for 'special privileges' for the lower castes. After the Poona Pact, by 1935, the British government was forced to provide 15 percent reservation for them in education and employment in the lower caste districts of Bengal, despite opposition from a large section of the upper caste. The acquisition of caste-based political entity by the Matua and Namasudras, the protest against socio-economic injustice, and the demand for their representation cannot be communalism, these are their political strategies. May be called a kind of protest against the existing social injustice'.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, at the same time under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur, the Namasudra movement overcame communalism, so he was able to say, that 'Even though I am a Namasudra, those who are poor, helpless, unwealthy and uneducated, are all my people.' CM, Mamata Banerjee also said in an emotional language that 'I want Thakurbari to shine on the international map. There is no such thing as low-high among human beings. Everyone lives with their heads held high. I am with you. I support the movement of the Matua

Mahasanga. I am also a member of Matua Mahasangh'. That is originally a reflection of Guruchand Thakur's ideology uttered by her, Mamata Bala Thakur, Guruchand's successor of Thakurbari, said, 'Your (chief minister's) name will be inscribed in gold in the heart of the Matua'. The dream will come true, this truth is the complete opposite of today's roaring 'Hinduvta' incurrence of Brahmanical scriptures. The formation of a Namasudra Development Board will bring real dignified development in Bengal only if the message of respect and real development can be given to the very lower caste people by giving up the promise of filling the ballot boxes. Otherwise not. Instead of founding the NDB and MDB in West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee announced on the 100th birth anniversary of Barma, the government decided to establish a university named Harichand-Guruchand in the presence of thousands of Matua and Namasudras at Thakur Nagar Thakurbari. According to the political culture of the state, the opposition has recently termed the CM's action plan and implementation was as a 'masterstroke' to Namasudra before the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, and thereafter Assembly election of 2012, the political 'vote bank grabbing strategy' or 'community-related division'. This is a kind of recognition of self-esteem, sketch close of education and social development, thinking of the lower caste refugees, talking about citizenship which was their century-long organized demand.

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