

## Evolution of Scheduled Castes People in West Dinajpur Special Reference to Namasudra: A Demographic Study

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**Abstract:** *Caste is integrated into parts of Indian society since the beginning of settled human civilization. But the word 'caste' or 'scheduled castes (SC)' was induced by the colonial ruler. The scheduled castes are those people who face multiple deprivations on account of their low position in the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system. This phenomenon had received extraordinary attention from the colonial ruler to stratify the Indians according to their perception and to implement the divide and rule policy. In the present study, a focus has been made on the demographic evolution of the scheduled caste people of West Dinajpur district of West Bengal. Police station-wise distribution of the SC people, their decadal increase, sex ratio, literacy, working population, etc have been discussed here. A special attempt has also been made to study the origin and evolution of the Namasudra people, the second-largest scheduled caste in West Bengal and third in the district also.*

**Keywords:** *Scheduled Castes, Cultivation, Chandal, Namasudra, evolution*

Caste is an integral part of Indian society since the beginning of settled human civilization. The word caste or scheduled caste had been manifested out of British colonial concern for the depressed class people who faced diverse deprivations on account of their low position in the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system. In pre-colonial texts, they were called accordingly to their social position such as chandala, antaja, asprishyas etc. This phenomenon had captured the keen attention of the colonial rulers and the Indian political leaders also. The rulers had maintained the pre-colonial trends to stratify the Indians according to their own perception. They used the same as tools of social stratification. The communal award of 1932, after the conclusion of two consecutive Round Table Conferences in London, assigned separate electorates not only for the Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and other categories but also expanded it to the depressed classes. But the historic fast unto death by Gandhi and posterior assigning of the Poona pact had replaced the separate electorate by reserved constituencies for the depressed class. The actual process of scheduling the castes took place after that in preparation of the

election of 1937 classification had done with the adoption of the Government of India (schedule caste) order 1936. In the Post-Colonial period also, acknowledging the trend number of depressed class people has scheduled which are known as scheduled caste in India and West Bengal also.

In the present study, we are going to discuss the demographic evolution of scheduled caste people of West Dinajpur of West Bengal. It will be better to introduce the West Dinajpur district first. In the Colonial period, Dinajpur was a district of Bengal province. On the eve of independence, Bengal was divided and the dividing line had drowned across the Dinajpur district. The one-third portion came to Indian dominion and created a district of West Bengal named West Dinajpur. The district lied between 26°29' 54' and 25°10' 55' north latitudes and between 89°0'30' and 87°48'37' east longitudes, demarked on the north by river Mahananda and the district of Dinajpur of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh; on the west by the district of Purnea of Bihar and by the district of Malda; on the south by Malda district and the district of Rajshahi, and Bogra of East Pakistan; on the east Dinajpur and Bogra of East Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> It is to mention that at the time of the creation of the district was not in the shape as described here. The northern portion that is Islampur subdivision had included in the district in 1956 to establish a connection with Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar as prescribed by State Reorganization Commission.<sup>2</sup> But the district had divided into two namely North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1992.<sup>3</sup> That is why the present study will be confined up to 1992.

A large portion (Islampur sub-division) of the district was included in the district in 1956 from Bihar and the data about the scheduled castes population of that region was not found properly to make a comparative study with the census of 1951 to the successive censuses. To overcome these difficulties the evolution of the SC population will be discussed since 1961 and the data of prior will be discussed separately. In 1950 the total number of scheduled castes was 58 in West Bengal. In the district of West Dinajpur, 52 scheduled castes existed at that time.<sup>4</sup> Few among these were with the little number of populations even below one hundred. It is to mention that only 18 castes were there of which number were more than one thousand. The total SC population was 123118 out of a total population of 720573 in the West Dinajpur district. Of them, 66997 were male and 56121 female. A very little number of them was urban only 4730; the rest 118388 was living in the rural areas.<sup>5</sup>

The important scheduled castes in the district were Bhumali, Bhuiya, Mahali, Muchi, Namasudra, Nuniya, Rajbanshi, Turi, etc.<sup>6</sup> If we throw light on the rural-urban distribution in 1951 comes out that very poor number only 3.8% (4730) people of scheduled castes were living in urban areas; among them only 1534 were female.<sup>7</sup>

It was decided by the constitution that the state should provide with special care the educational and economic interest of the weaker section of the people, and protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation

(Article 46). The constitution does not ascertain the scheduled caste and tribe. It sent to state the liability of selecting the caste to schedule, though the president of India can do that with the consultation of state or union territory. Based on those provision in 1956 the government of West Bengal released scheduled caste order and the number of scheduled caste reached to 63. Some of the prior lists were excluded and a few were merged to another. For example, Kora, Mahali, etc were excluded and Muchi and few others had merged with Hari.<sup>8</sup>

In 1976 an amendment was made and the scheduled castes and scheduled tribe Order (amendment) Act 1976 had passed and the number of scheduled castes had reduced to 59. This schedule had retained up to the end of the study period.<sup>9</sup> Anyway, keeping in mind the amendments of scheduled castes order we shall discuss the decadal variation and other aspects of the demographic evolution of West Dinajpur District.

**Table-1**

Decadal increase of scheduled castes population in  
West Dinajpur, 1961-1991

Census year	Total Population	Scheduled castes population (% to total population)	Percentage in West Bengal	Increase of Scheduled castes population (%)
1961	1323797	286453 (21.60)	19.7	---
1971	1859887	429578 (32.10)	19.9	50.00
1981	2402947	687094 (28.57)	21.9	60.00
1991	3127653	907553 (29.02)	23.62	32.09

*Sources: Census of India, (relevant years)*

It is evident from the table above that proportion of scheduled castes population in West Dinajpur district was higher than the state proportion always and the gap between these was widened in 1971 and then reduced slightly and gradually. Perhaps this was directly linked with the partition of Bengal and the pattern of refugee influx from East Pakistan. The scheduled castes people of East Pakistan were depended on the land for their livelihood. This in fact that the numerically two most important scheduled castes group Rajbanshi and Namasudra were agriculturists. There was a little number of scheduled castes agriculturist people in the first wave of refugees right after the partition. There were educated middle classes with movable assets and skills which they could carry with them across the border. A statistic is that 1.1 million Hindus migrated by 1<sup>st</sup> June 1948, of whom about 350000 were urban bhadraloke; another 550000 belonged to rural Hindu gentry and many of the rest were a businessman.<sup>10</sup> They were followed by the artisan and crafts associates who used to work for their predominantly Hindu patrons. When

the situation went unbearable the agriculturist classes had thought to move. Because migrating to West Bengal for them was a deeply insecure anticipation. Their only asset land could not be moved. By and large, they deserted the little they possessed in the east only when they were driven out by extreme violence.<sup>11</sup> The question may arise as that how this process could widen the gap? The answer is that as the agriculturist people had chosen to resettle in the agricultural tract, naturally West Dinajpur was preferred and the gap was widened. After the liberation of Bangladesh, the influx had been declared illegal and though continued but reduced in number.

The distribution of the scheduled castes population all over the district was not the same. The highest concentration of the SC population was in the Kaliaganj, Kushmundi and Hemtabad police stations area. Proportionately in the police stations of the Islampur subdivision area percentage of the SC population was low and the lowest one was the Goalpokhar area.

**Table-2**

Distribution of Scheduled Castes population in West Dinajpur district 1971

Name of Unit	The proportion of Scheduled Castes to the total population		
	Total	Rural	Urban
West Dinajpur	23.10	24.76	6.95
Chopra	10.76	10.76	—
Islampur	6.57	7.05	3.00
Goalpokhar	4.74	4.74	—
Chakulia	12.62	12.62	—
Karandighi	9.52	9.22	15.56
Raiganj	32.29	39.58	4.44
Hamtabad	38.50	38.50	—
Kaliaganj	51.50	59.56	12.92
Kushmundi	45.34	45.34	—
Itahar	26.64	26.64	—
Banshihari	22.14	22.14	—
Gangarampur	21.62	22.84	13.32
Kumarganj	24.41	24.41	—
Tapan	28.06	28.06	—
Balurghat	17.89	25.09	4.78
Hili	19.75	20.59	14.59

*Source: District census Handbook, West Dinajpur 1971.*

The literary condition of the people of the scheduled caste of West Dinajpur district was not a satisfactory one. The percentage of literacy was below the state percentage. But one thing is noticeable that as the overall literacy condition of the district lagged far behind the state, the literacy of scheduled castes was not so. It meant that the gap of state and district scheduled castes literacy percentage was not wide like the general literacy.

**Table-3**

## Literacy among the scheduled caste in West Dinajpur

Year of census	Literacy in West Dinajpur		Literacy in West Bengal	
	Total literacy	Literacy among SC	Total literacy	Literacy among SC
1961	17.06	10.84	29.28	13.58
1971	22.12	15.91	33.20	17.80
1981	33.02	20.00	48.65	24.37
1991	39.29	33.05	57.70	42.21

Sources: Census of India, (relevant years)

The distribution of various scheduled castes in the different region or districts of West Bengal is different which have made such kind of differentiation. It is evident that literacy among few scheduled castes in West Bengal was almost the same as the total literacy and few are lagged far behind. Namasudra, Poundra, Jalia Koivarta, Panti, Tiyar are in the first group.<sup>12</sup> But among them, only Nanasudra and Jalia Koivarta are in moderate number in the district. Others are very few. In the district Rajbanshis are predominant and literacy among them was moderate and progress was also moderate during the period of study.

The working population among the scheduled castes was mainly agriculture-based. It is fact that the Rajbanshi, Poliya and Namasudra had constituted a large portion (77.25% in 1991) of the scheduled castes population and these were mainly agricultural castes. It is also true that a major portion of them had constituted the bulk of agricultural labour.

**Table-4**

## Number of working total population and SC population of West Dinajpur in 1991

Working sectors	Number of the total population	Number of SC population
Total population	3127653	907553
Number of 0-6 age group	619770	184655
Total main worker	1022790	310118
Cultivator	438852	132163

Agricultural labor	360832	120161
Livestock, Forestry, Fishing, Hunting, Plantation, Orchards and allied activities	12040	6540
Mining and Quarrying	122	46
Manufacturing, Processing, Servicing, and repairs in Household Industry	41039	7617 Other than the household industry 13063
Construction	7046	1909
Trade and commerce	60502	10480
Transport, Storage and Communication	19586	6320
Other service	62916	11819
Marginal Worker	56399	21933
Non- Worker	2048464	575502

Source: Census of India 1991.

Now we will focus on the evolution of major scheduled castes people of West Dinajpur district. At the beginning of the journey of West Dinajpur, there were 52 scheduled castes as per the census of 1951, though the constitution had listed 58. Among these only 18 were there with the number more than one thousand. Anyway, the evolution of these major 18 was as follows.

**Table-5**

Major scheduled castes and their evolution in West Dinajpur district (1951-1991)

Name of sub-caste	1951		1971		1991	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Bagdi	917	655	17113	16181	874	826
Bhumali	3071	2526	3628	3958	8784	8495
Bhuiya	1460	1512	609	954	1841	1599
Chamar	889	626	8169	8629	9414	8743
Hari	983	719	6219	6624	11952	11421
Jalia Kaivarta	669	630	5696	5389	15874	15408
Jhalo-Malo, Malo	553	763	1810	1217	6469	6756
Kora	738	573	Excluded From the list of SC by order of 1956			
Mahli	1711	1254				
Mal	699	682	392	281	4973	4749
Muchi	1629	889	Calculated with Hari			

Musahar	644	582	2387	2346	4064	3777
Namasudra	3751	1992	15856	14792	56262	48752
Nuniya	1448	1047	1796	1138	5729	4566
Poliya	5713	4331	40228	38427	55784	50664
Rajbanshi	35997	31492	73630	60682	252420	237222
Tiyer	301	1120	1723	1569	858	987
Turi	1810	1573	2019	1432	4442	4362

*Sources: Census of India, relevant years.*

[Note: there were 15 scheduled castes with numbers 200-1000 and the rest were below 200. Six scheduled castes have not existed in the district]

It is evident from the table above that the Namasudra was the third-largest scheduled caste community next to Rajbanshi and Poliya (in Colonial Bengal 2<sup>nd</sup> largest). The prime objective of this study is to find out the origin of Namasudra and its evolution in the district of West Dinajpur.

The origin or the history of the origin of the Namasudra caste is a matter of debate. It is true that in pre-colonial time even before the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was no caste named Namasudra. So the term is the new one. Before that these people were known as Chandala or Charal. In the 1911 census, Chandala was enumerated as Namasudra.<sup>13</sup> Now the question is that who was the Chandala or Charal? Prime debate is laid here. About this, the ethnographers had places different kinds of arguments. As the caste system of Hindu society is a complex and very sensitive matter the indigenous historians and social scientists are delivering their opinion with safeguard.

The Colonial ethnographers opined that the Chandala was a tribe. James Wise in his 'Notes on the Races, Castes and Tribes of Eastern Bengal' had classified the Chandala as a Dravidian Tribe.<sup>14</sup> Mr. Beverly opined that the term Chandala is a generic title and the Chandala tribe of Bengal is equivalent with the Mal of Rajmahal hill.<sup>15</sup> H.H. Risley recorded in 1891, "the Chandala of Bengal invariably call themselves as Namasudra and with characteristics jealousy higher division of the caste apply the name Chandala to the lower, who in their turn pass it to the Dom". The Europeans relate them to 'Chandala Raja' of 'Bhawal' forest in the north of the Dacca district as tribal chieftdom. Few local historians argued that during the Pala period they embraced Buddhism, but after Pala, during the resurgence of Hinduism they were disgracefully called Chandala Raja. So it is clear that Chandala as an underhand race was created later by Brahmanism.<sup>16</sup> The Colonial ethnographers had wanted to say that the tribal Chandals were gradually absorbed into the Hindu social system through the process of adoption of Hindu culture and social tradition what has been conceptualized by social scientists as the Hindu method of Tribal absorption, Sanskritization or De-

tribalization, etc. But problem is that the community which formed chiefdom did not try to legitimize themselves as a ruling caste through patronizing non-tribal culture unlike others- how it possible? At least they had to be placed lower caste not untouchable.

Traditional view is that the Chandala, since the ancient period has been considered as the most degraded caste who according to the tradition originated from offspring of a protiloma or hypergamous union of a Sudra Male and Brahmin woman. The Brahmanical texts depicted them as lowest of mankind, as an outcast. Gradually the term Chandal became a term of abuse. But there is a problem to accept such kind of origin of Chandal. The question is how the huge concentration of the Chandals in a particular area of Bengal was possible due to the union of Sudra men and Brahmin women?

Another theory about the origin of Namasudra, priorly Chandala tells about the Brahmin origin. Risley had recorded that the Chandals of Dacca had claimed that they were Brahmin who degraded to Chandal by eating with the Sudras. Regarding this theory, another story of Vashistha (Brahmin), had cursed his son to be degraded as Chandal for committing the ceremonial mistake.<sup>17</sup> Another story is that Namos a sage (son of Kashapa), his son had married a Sudra woman and their ancestors were named as 'Namasudra' taking 'Nama' from 'Namos' and 'Sudra' as maternal caste.<sup>18</sup> But this explanation seems to be imagination only.

Few modern scholars belong to Matuatism tried to explain the origin of Namasudra on historical ground. They claimed that the Namasudra people were Chandal as per the census of 1872 and 1881, before that they used to introduce themselves as 'Nama', not Chandal. The 'Nama' word had derived from the relation with Nandas and Mauryas. After the decline of Mauryas Brahmin had become the ruler and during Sena's rule, the oppression on the Buddhists got to climax. Performing Buddhism became impossible and the people had started to adjust with Hinduism. Up to the Pala rule these people were known as Nama by name.<sup>19</sup> But during the Sena rule, these people were named Chandal, outcaste and in the census also they were enumerated as Chandal. But the historical fact is that in the ancient period the word 'Chandal' was used as a generic term to refer to all the lower caste people.<sup>20</sup> But this name was not proportionate to the people as their socio-cultural progress was noticeable during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the leadership of Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur. They claimed to enumerate themselves as Nama but with them, inferior 'Sudra' has been added by Brahmanism and enumerated as 'Namasudra'.<sup>21</sup>

Now the light will be thrown to the distribution of the Namasudra People in West Dinajpur district. The concentration of Namasudra people in colonial Bengal was mainly in the eastern districts. The six districts Bakharganj, Faridpur, Dacca, Mymansingha, Joshor and Khulna had bear 71% of Namasudra of Bengal in 1881 and in 1901 it had reached 75.14%.<sup>22</sup> It was

possible because Eastern Bengal was the outer circle of the Brahmanical civilization; the caste system there was less oppressive.<sup>23</sup> Generally, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, the spread of Buddhism and Jainism happened there to a great extent. But during the Sena rule, oppression on these people was continued for a long time. We know that after the invasion of Nadia by Baktyar Khilji the Sena rule had been retained with the centre Bikrampur and oppression over Buddhists had compelled these people to adjust to the situation and gradually they embraced Hinduism. They were called Chandala by Brahmanism as inferior to society and placed them out of Hindu caste and made them untouchable.

In the Western region of Bengal, the concentration of Namasudra was very low. In 1901, the number of Namasudra people in Dinajpur district was 5048, only 0.27% of the total population.<sup>24</sup> In the region of West Dinajpur district, the evolution of the Namasudra people was as below.

**Table-6**  
Evolution of Namasudra in West Dinajpur, 1872-1991

Census years	Total number of Namasudra people
1872	7371
1881	7180
1891	6981
1901	5048
1911	4201
1921	4001
1931	3752
1941	5093
1951	5743
1961	18406
1971	30645
1981	63161
1991	105014

*Source: Census of India, Relevant years*

The table above ventilates that from the beginning of the census the number of Namasudra people was decreasing gradually. It was directly related to the agricultural economy. The basic means of livelihood of the Namasudra people was cultivation. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the change of river bed in Western districts of Bengal agriculture had affected harshly; right when in eastern Bengal the same was flourished very

much. This is why agriculturist people had migrated from the Western region to the eastern region of Bengal. Moreover, changes in the Drainage pattern had made the Western region feverish.<sup>25</sup>

This caused the decrease of Namasudra People in the region of West Dinajpur during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the Post-Colonial period cause of the increase was continuous migration from East Pakistan. As discussed earlier that during the first wave of Migration from East Bengal to West Bengal there was a little number of Namasudra People but when in the next years' communal tension transformed into riots they were compelled to leave their homeland and stepped to West Bengal. So after 1950, the increase of Namasudra people was considerable on the consecutive censuses.

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