

## Discrimination, No-confidence and Protest: The Namasudras of Bengal during the Swadeshi Era (1905-1911)

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***Abstract:** The partition of Bengal at the beginning of the twentieth century was a remarkable event in the history of Bengal. When the colonial authorities executed partition, the educated upper caste Hindus launched a strong agitation against the British government. They also appealed to the Muslims and 'untouchable' Namasudras of Bengal to participate in the boycott and Swadeshi movements called by them in protest against the division of the province. But the vast majority of the Muslims and the Namasudras refused to take part in any agitation together with them against the government. The caste Hindus stigmatized the Namasudras as 'Chandals' and despised them through the ages. They also raised their objection to offer any civil rights to them in public places. The Hindu Bhadralok zamindars perpetrated severe economic and social oppression on the Namasudras. The colonial authorities, on the contrary, redressed many of their grievances, including the deletion of the contemptuous 'Chandal' epithet ascribed to them. The British government also rekindled their aspirations. In the Swadeshi period, the Namasudras of East Bengal turned down repeated appeals of the upper-caste Bengali Hindus to launch an anti-British united agitation. They felt, from their everyday experiences, what their needs of the hour were. With their refusal to participate in any movement called by upper caste Hindus, they showed their lack of confidence in them. At the same time, they lodged their protest against the Hindu Bhadraloks, who have always despised them severely and denied their human rights, imposing the 'Chandal' stigma on their community. This paper explores the socioeconomic perspective that prompted the Namasudras of Bengal not to participate in the Swadeshi period political movements against the British government led by the Bhadralok Hindu castes.*

**Keywords:** Partition, Boycott, Swadeshi, Namasudra, Discrimination, No-confidence, Protest

The Government of India officially announced its decision to divide the province of Bengal on July 19, 1905. It was declared that a new province, 'Eastern Bengal and Assam', would be set up comprising the divisions of Chittagong, Dacca, and Rajshahi, with Hill Tippera, Malda District, and

Assam. The formal proclamation of the partition of Bengal came on September 1 and took effect on October 16, 1905.<sup>1</sup> The declaration of Lord Curzon to divide the province of Bengal produced a mixed reaction among the Bengalis. The upper and lower-middle-class Bengali Hindus staged a strong protest against the partition of Bengal. On the other hand, the vast majority of Muslims and lower-caste Hindus stayed away from the anti-partition movement. The movement against the British government in India had been laying a solid foundation and exerting pressure on the British rulers through the writings, lectures, and political activities of Indian leaders from the beginning of the early twentieth century. When the British government announced its decision to split the province of Bengal in July 1905, the anti-British movement in Bengal gained new momentum. The educated middle class of Bengal resolved to boycott British goods and buy indigenous (*Swadeshi*) goods in protest against the partition. It was also resolved that efforts would be made to set up indigenous institutions to spread national education and British institutions, including educational institutions, would be boycotted.<sup>2</sup> Their demonstrations against the colonial government produced little effect on the East Bengal Namasudras. The leaders of the *Swadeshi* movement were predominantly upper-caste Hindu *zamindars* and the educated middle class. In Bengal, the Namasudras, a humble cultivating caste, were designated as 'Chandals' and were treated as an untouchable community. The upper-caste Hindus have always regarded them with great contempt.<sup>3</sup> In the social space, the higher Hindu castes have never accepted the human dignity and civil rights of the Namasudras. The Hindu *Bhadralok zamindars* exerted ruthless financial oppression on the Namasudra peasants. During the anti-partition movement in Bengal led by their haters and persecutors, the Namasudras remained aloof from any activity against the British government.<sup>4</sup>

The Namasudras (Chandals) of Bengal were the second-largest Hindu caste of Bengal. They were the largest Hindu community in Eastern Bengal and were mostly concentrated in the eastern districts of Jessore, Faridpur, Bakarganj, Dacca, Mymensing, and Sylhet.<sup>5</sup> Even in the nineteenth century, the Namasudras were designated as 'Chandals' by upper-caste Hindus for reasons unknown to social anthropologists. According to the Brahmanical texts, the Brahmins are at top of the caste hierarchy and the Chandals are at the bottom. In common parlance, even today, the term 'Chandal' is often used to denote the antonym of 'Brahmin'. The Chandals (Namasudras) have been despised by the upper caste Hindus from time immemorial, and even treading on the shadow caste by a Chandal has been considered an act of pollution.<sup>6</sup> In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the term 'Chandal' was used only in abuse throughout India.<sup>7</sup> Since the Namasudras were considered an untouchable community, they had to endure unbearable social indignity from their upper-caste brothers. They were not allowed to visit public places or places of worship. They were prohibited from collecting water from public tanks, and their children were not allowed to impart education while sitting

side by side with upper-caste children. They had to live in separate quarters of the village together with their fellow caste men. On account of Brahmanical aversion, a large body of the Namasudras migrated from their original habitat in the province and settled in the dreary and unwholesome swamps of the southern wastes of Faridpur, Jessore, and Bakarganj in the past.<sup>8</sup> To protest the indignity inflicted on them, the Namasudras staged a general strike in the district of Faridpur in the early part of the year 1873, resolving not to serve any member of the upper classes, in whatever capacity, unless a better position among the Hindu castes than what they at present occupy was given to them.<sup>9</sup> The general strike called by the Namasudras produced a tremendous economic impact and civil disturbance not only in Faridpur but also in the adjoining districts of Bakarganj and Jessore. The strike was so complete that the Magistrate of Faridpur, in the course of his official inquiry into the affected areas, even after four months of its inception, found 'the fields ... untilled, the houses unthatched, and not a Chandal in the service of Hindu or Mahomedan, or a Chandal woman in any market.'<sup>10</sup>

But the upper-caste Hindus showed no sympathy for the indignity ascribed to the Namasudras. The higher-order Brahmins did not officiate in the religious and social ceremonies of the Namasudras. They had Brahmins of their own who would render service to them. These special classes of Brahmins were popularly known as *Barna-Brahmans* or '*Chandaler Brahmans*', and they were not received on equal terms by members of their fellow priestly caste. The ordinary washermen and barbers refused to serve them. Their washermen and barbers belonged to their caste.<sup>11</sup> The Hindus considered pilgrimages to Puri and offering puja to Lord Jagannath to be virtuous acts. Under the recommendation of the Brahmins, the Namasudras (Chandals) and sixteen other Hindu castes were banned from entering the temple of Jagannath at Puri under Section 7 of Regulation IV of 1809 due to their low ritual rank in Hindu society.<sup>12</sup> The upper-caste Hindus of Bengal also denied temple entry to the Namasudras. They were prohibited from entering the temples or the *puja mandaps* of the *Bhadralokzamindars*. They had to sit either on the ground or a separate piece of sackcloth in the court of the zamindars and smoke from a *hookah* set apart for them. The upper-caste Hindus denied having meals sitting side by side with them and they were not allowed to appear before the *Bhadralok* castes wearing shoes. The Namasudras lodged a combined movement to wear shoes in areas of their concentration throughout the Pirozpur Police Station in Bakarganj District against this derogative practice around the last decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> They carried the 'Chandal' stigma labelled on them and were despised equally by the Brahmins and upper caste Hindus, though they were a humble cultivating and boating caste of Bengal. They were struggling to wipe out their abusive caste name for a long time, but the Brahmins and caste Hindus were not sympathetic to their demand. Since 'Chandal' was a contemptuous designation, the despised Namasudras were compelled to live as a distinct community with their fellow caste men, their priests, and their traditions.<sup>14</sup>

Besides suffering consumption of hatred by upper caste Hindus due to their low position in the Hindu caste hierarchy, the Namasudras had to suffer severe economic oppression by local *zamindars*. Harichand Thakur, the founder of the Matua sect, and his family members were evicted from their ancestral inhabitancy at Safaldanga by the local *zamindar*, Suryamani Majumdar, on a fabricated charge of default in payment of arrear rent.<sup>15</sup> On account of severe poverty among the vast majority of the Namasudras, they would suffer from poverty-related distress. The *zamindars* of Bengal, most of whom were upper-castes Hindus, had raised *zamindari* rents seven-fold since 1793 by 1872.<sup>16</sup> The rampant enhancement of *zamindari* rents produced tremendous economic pressure on the *raiyats*, who were predominantly Muslims or Namasudras in Eastern Bengal. In the year 1911, around 78 percent of the earning members of the Namasudras were engaged in agriculture, and of those, 95.71 percent were cultivators. The majority of these cultivators were tenant farmers, and a few were sharecroppers or *bargadars*.<sup>17</sup> The cultivating classes, including the Namasudras of Bakarganj, Faridpur, and Mymensingh, had a long history of agrarian discontent with the upper-caste Hindu *zamindars*.<sup>18</sup> Their repeated demands for a reduction of *zamindari* rents were turned down.

The impact of a hundred years of British rule in India produced a huge transformation in the economic pattern of the country. Transport and communication systems were modernized, and Western education through the English language was introduced in urban areas. But in rural areas where the Namasudras and other low castes lived, the condition of primary education facilities was very dismal. Almost in every village of the Hindus, there was a *pathsala*, a Hindu elementary vernacular school, under a *guru*. The *guru*, or teacher, ordinarily a Kayastha, would impart education to students mostly belonging to the shopkeeping, trading, merchant, and banking castes. The male children of the low castes or outcastes had no room in the village *pathsalas*.<sup>19</sup> If a boy from an untouchable community was admitted to a school, he used to be treated with contempt by his upper-caste classmates and teachers. When Mukunda Behary Mullick, a Namasudra leader who later became a member of the Shyama-Huq Ministry of Bengal, was at Bagerhat High School, there were three water containers in the school – one for the upper castes, one for the lower castes, and the third for the Muslims. The seating patterns for the students were arranged in the same way.<sup>20</sup> Bipin Chandra Mridha (Majumdar) [1891-1984], a Namasudra and the father of poet Binay Majumdar, was treated similarly at Dacca Engineering College by Brahmin and Kayastha students. He was required to hear the lecture from the teachers sitting in the corridor of the classroom away from the upper castes.<sup>21</sup> On account of this discriminatory mindset of the upper caste Hindus, the parents of the lower order of the Sudras and untouchables sent their children to the *maktabs* run by the Muslims. *Maktabs* were accessible not only to upper-caste Hindus but also to lower-caste Hindus, such as 'untouchables'. Even in the forties of the twentieth century, a large number of Hindu students, comprising both higher and lower castes, received their education in the

*maktabs*. In March 1940, there were eighteen districts in Bengal where over 1,000 Hindu students in each district read in *maktabs*.

**Table-1**  
**Hindu Students reading in *maktabs*<sup>22</sup>**

Sl. No.	District	Number of Hindu students in <i>maktabs</i>
1	Rangpur	15690
2	Dacca	9576
3	Noakhali	7388
4	Chittagong	6561
5	Bakarganj	5976
6	Mymensingh	3436
7	Jessore	3216
8	Faridpur	2536
9	Burdwan	2437
10	Nadia	2312
11	24-Parganas	2219
12	Midnapore	2190
13	Dinajpur	1654
14	Hooghly	1561
15	Murshidabad	1486
16	Bogra	1455
17	Birbhum	1177
18	Rajshahi	1017

On account of poverty and aversion of the upper-caste Hindus, the Namasudras were discriminated against in imparting education to their children. The Census Report of 1901 reveals that the male literacy rate among the Brahmins, Baidyas, and Kayasthas was 457, 543, and 590 per thousand, respectively. On the other hand, the percentage of male literates among the Namasudras was far behind compared to that of the Brahmins, Baidyas, and Kayasthas. Only 64 people were literate among the thousand Namasudra males, according to the Census Returns of 1901.<sup>23</sup>

The Western mode of education through the English language was one of the major contributions of British rule in India. During the reign of Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck, Persian was displaced by the local languages in the lower courts and English in the higher courts.<sup>24</sup> The British Government announced a liberal policy to keep the doors of educational institutions open to all. This limited patronage of the colonial government became a boon for the lower classes of Bengal. Their well-off segment began to send their boys to schools run by Christian missionaries. From a letter written by a resident of Chinsura to the editor of *Samachar Chandrika* dated March 3, 1832, it is

learned that the Christian missionaries were spreading education among the sons of the porters, labourers, Pods, and Bagdis.<sup>25</sup> The upper-caste Hindus viewed the education of the lower classes as a catastrophic act against them. Untouchability was a major impediment for lower-caste children in educational institutions. The educationally qualified lower castes were not chosen for employment because the recruitment agencies were monopolized by the Hindu *Bhadralok* castes. As a result, there was almost no representation of the 'untouchable' Namasudras in public employment in nineteenth-century Bengal. From the following tabular data, the dismal picture of the Namasudras in public employment can be observed:

**Table-2**  
**Selected occupation of *Bhadralok* castes and Namasudras**  
**as per the census report 1901<sup>26</sup>**

Occupation	Brahman	Baidya	Kayastha	Namasudra
Officers of Govt.	326	88	372	0
Clerks, Inspector, etc.	6,308	1,033	9,915	9
Clerical service under Local Bodies	536	74	605	0
Professors, Teachers,&c.	9,722	838	10,881	70

The British rulers arrived in India from a continent where the industrial revolution had already taken place. Their social behaviours and customs were different from those of the Indians. To them, all their Indian subjects were 'natives'. Their administrative policies for India have always been adopted, keeping in mind the interests of Great Britain. During British rule in India, the colonial government often took advantage of the pre-existing social tensions among different religious groups, different castes, and different economic classes in India. At the same time, Christian missionaries from different Western countries, as well as a few British civilians with human values, have done an admirable job for the benefit of the country's common masses. In Bengal, the Namasudras got many benefits as a result of British rule. From the latter half of the nineteenth century, the British government in Bengal had to rectify a series of economic, social, and religious outrages going on against the Namasudras.

The European indigo planters began to oppress the *raiyyats* of Bengal by forcefully involving them in the cultivation of indigo in the first half of the nineteenth century. Their tyrannical activities were concentrated mainly in the districts of Nadia, Jessore, Faridpur, Pabna, Mymensingh, 24-Parganas, Rajshahi, Malda, and Murshidabad. The peasant classes in these districts were predominantly Muslims, Namasudras (Chandals), and Kaibarttas (Mahishyas). In the early nineteenth century, the peasant communities of Bengal, like the Muslims, Namasudras, and the Kaibarttas, started a combined movement against indigo planters.<sup>27</sup> The direction of their movement was

towards the indigo planters, not the British government. They kept their faith in the colonial government and sent mass deputations to the police, magistrate, and the Lieutenant Governor of the province. When Sir J.P. Grant, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, was making his journey by steamer from Calcutta to Pabna in August 1859, he found that lakhs of peasants had been praying for justice before him against the oppression of the indigo planters standing miles after miles on both sides of the river banks. They were also demanding the passing of an order by the government so that the indigo plantations in Bengal ceased. A few days later, as he was returning along the Kumar and Kaliganga rivers through the districts of Nadia, Jessore, and Pabna, he saw a large crowd of peasants, both men, and women, who had been seeking justice from him for the entire 60-70-mile journey.<sup>28</sup> The Namasudra peasants realized that the local *zamindars*, upper-caste Hindus, and European planters were the main tyrants for them. They also staged their movement against the indigo planters in a non-violent way. Harichand Thakur, a Namasudra and the founder of the Matua sect, led a non-violent march to the Jonasur indigo factory of Mr. Dick, the planter of the Gopalganj area, with his 400-500 Matua followers, comprising Bishwanath, Govinda, Heeraman, and Dasharath, in protest against the oppression of the *naibs*, *dewans*, and *amins* of the factory.<sup>29</sup> The government listened to the peasants' complaints, and the Europeans' forced indigo plantation was stopped. The Namasudra peasants, together with the Muslims, Mahishyas, and other cultivating communities, got rid of the tyranny of the indigo planters.

The Namasudras were compelled to remove the filth in the jails, to which they strongly objected. They were also demanding to be given orders from the government so that they were not compelled to do this unclean job. On account of their protest, W.S. Wells, the Magistrate of Faridpur, accepted their demand and wrote to the Inspector-General of Jails: 'It is a most humiliating reproach which should be at once removed.... Under our law men are equal, but Chundals have no such equality if they alone, as a class, are obliged to perform the most degrading duties.'<sup>30</sup> The colonial authorities accepted their demand, and the government resolved that the Namasudras (Chandals) would not be forced to act as sweepers in the jails.

The upper-caste Hindus despised the Namasudras by inflicting upon them the stigma of 'Chandal'. In government records, newspapers, and other printed texts, their caste name was also written as 'Chandal'. They raised their voice in protest against this social indignity imposed by upper-caste Hindus. They wanted to wipe out this abusive label attached to their caste. Whenever asked about their caste, they invariably called themselves Namasudra.<sup>31</sup> The British government was sympathetic toward their demand. On September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1883, W.C. Macpherson, the Assistant Commissioner of Sylhet, issued an order with the direction that 'Namasudra must always be written and not Chang or Chandal for all persons of the said caste... anyone who does not write Namasudra shall be removed from employ.' He directed that a notice be distributed to all stamp vendors and hung in the Tahsil, Court Office,

English Office, Nazarat, Criminal Office, and Municipal Outpost.<sup>32</sup> From the days of the Chandal Movement of 1872–73, the main demand of the Namasudras (Chandals) was that the 'Chandal' stigma imposed on them be deleted. The British government was considered in this matter. In the census tables of 1891, their caste name was recorded as 'Namasudra or Chandal'. Ten years later, the colonial government recorded them as 'Namasudra (Chandal)' in the census tables, and finally, in 1911, the British government wiped out the 'Chandal' stigma labelled on them.<sup>33</sup>

During British rule, a smaller segment of the Namasudras of Eastern Bengal became prosperous and wealthy, taking advantage of the newly evolved economic opportunities under British rule. In Bengal, the Namasudras formed a large proportion of the peasantry, though they were competent to do all kinds of work. Because of their bravery and superior knowledge of river transport, they were the only Hindu community whose members were employed in the boats (*bajra*) hired by the Europeans.<sup>34</sup> Their employment in river transport services generated a new economic opportunity for them. The skilled boating professionals among the Namasudras took advantage of this opportunity and earned some extra money. Some of the Namasudras accumulated wealth through the cultivation and trading of jute in northern Bakarganj and southern Faridpur, as well as in the Narail and Magura subdivisions of Jessore and the northern lowlands of Khulna. Some of them became rich by means of river-borne trade, salt trade, and as dealers in crops.<sup>35</sup>

The Namasudra medical practitioners popularised the Chandsi medical system with their skills in the nineteenth century. The Chandsi medical system was invented by Vishnu Hari Das, 'Dhanwantari', around the year 1536 at Chandsi village in Barisal District.<sup>36</sup> The fame of Chandsi surgeons was so great that patients suffering from piles, fistulas, etc. came to Chandsi for their medical treatment from all the neighbouring districts.<sup>37</sup> The Namasudras practiced this indigenous hereditary medical system with a great reputation in all parts of Eastern Bengal. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Namasudra surgeons, upon learning the Chandsi system of medicine, began practicing their profession in all parts of Bengal. Due to their good and brisk practice in medicine, the Namasudra doctors raised themselves upward on the economic scale.<sup>38</sup> Very soon, a small segment of the Namasudras established themselves as shopkeepers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, oilmen, as well as successful traders.<sup>39</sup>

This comparatively wealthy segment of the Namasudras could not distinguish themselves from their poor fellow caste-men since they were very small in number in comparison to their upper caste counterparts. The common suffering of the Namasudras because of their low social position in the caste hierarchy generated caste consciousness among them, which cut across the divisions between the rich and the poor. Ray Chand Mundle, Nilmoni Biswas of Dout Koorra and Sibudhali, Ramchand Bugsha, and Bhojan Bala of Poorsoor—all these leaders of the Chandal (Namasudara) Movement



of 1872–73 were fairly rich men.<sup>40</sup> This relatively prosperous segment of the Namasudras always stood at the forefront of any movement to secure economic or social justice for them.

The British government introduced a liberal education system in Bengal and announced that the doors of educational institutions were open to all irrespective of caste, creed, and religion. The colonial government also declared in the Charter Act of 1833 that 'No Native ... nor any natural-born Subject of His Majesty resident therein, shall, by reason only of his Religion, Place of Birth Descent, Colour, or any of them, be disabled from holding any Place, Office, or Employment under the said Company.'<sup>41</sup> The Queen in 1858 proclaimed that all in British India were granted equal protection of the law. Within the next fifty years since the royal proclamation at Allahabad, Namasudras like Dr. Dinabandhu Mandal, Pandit Raghunath Sarkar, Krishna Kumar Roy of Dacca District, and Keshablal Sarkar of Pabna District, got higher education in the face of spiteful behaviour by the upper-caste Hindus.<sup>42</sup> The Namasudra leaders had been consistently demanding adequate educational facilities for them, and they were receiving sympathetic responses both from the Christian missionaries and the colonial government. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the better-off Namasudras were sending their children to educational institutions in considerable numbers. In reply to a question asked by Babu Brojendra Kishor Ray Chaudhuri regarding the progress of education among the Namasudras of the Bengal Presidency, O'Malley, the then in charge of the education department, reported on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1918 that 41,105 Namasudra students, comprising 36,932 boys and 5,173 girls, were under instruction during the year 1916-17. Of them, 100 boys were studying in colleges; 1,489 boys were in high schools; 1,690 boys were in middle schools; 32,087 boys and 5,138 girls were in primary schools. The rest were studying in special and indigenous schools.<sup>43</sup> From the Census Report of 1901, it is found that 4,600 rent-receivers, 499 medical practitioners, 70 professors and teachers, and 27 lawyers and law agents belonged to the Namasudra caste in the five divisions of Bengal.<sup>44</sup> But the Namasudras were not appointed to higher administrative posts. In 1907, a delegation led by Guruchand Thakur, together with his son Shashibhusan Thakur and four of his close associates, Bhihamadeb Das, Dr. Tarini Charan Bala, Radhamohan Biswas, and Purnachandra Mullick, called on Sir Lancelot Hare, the Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam, and appraised him about social discrimination against them. They also submitted their prayer that their community needed better educational facilities and an increasing number of representations in public employment to delete the 'Chandal' stigma attached to their caste. Immediately after this meeting, Guruchand's son, Shashibhusan Thakur, was appointed Sub-Registrar, and Dr. Tarini Charan Bala was appointed a government doctor. In early 1908, Kumud Behary Mullick of Khulna was appointed a Deputy Magistrate. At a later date, Siddheshwar Halder of Faridpur became the second Deputy Magistrate from among the Namasudras.<sup>45</sup> Despite all the apathy and opposition of the Hindu

*Bhadralok* castes, a segment of the Eastern Bengal Namasudras received education from institutions set up by the colonial government and got public appointments under them.

The Namasudras were not allowed to stay in hotels or to have meals in restaurants in urban areas, even in the early twentieth century, since they were considered untouchables. The Namasudra students could not get admission to any mess or hostel unless they concealed their actual caste identity. They adopted Kayastha surnames and suppressed their caste to have accommodation there. If their upper caste in-mates could unearth their actual caste identity, they had to consume unbearable disgrace, both physical and mental, from them. For this reason, the majority of the Namasudra students would stay in houses belonging to their community in towns like Calcutta and Dacca.<sup>46</sup> The Namasudra leaders had been demanding separate hostels for boys of their caste, requiring accommodation in the cities for higher education. The colonial government considered their demand sympathetically and established special hostels for them at Dacca, Barakandi (Faridpur), and Barisal.<sup>47</sup>

When the British government announced the partition of Bengal in 1905, the middle-class Bengali Hindus expressed a sharp reaction against the proclamation. They started a strong movement against the colonial government with the call to the Bengalis to boycott British goods and to buy only indigenous goods. A call was also given to boycott British institutions, and a resolution for national education was adopted. The upper-caste Hindu Bengalis announced their political ideals based upon the principles of the Vedas and Puranas without showing any concern for the economic backwardness and social indignity of the lower castes. In Bengal, the Namasudras could not relate to the feelings of the *Bhadralok Swadeshis* since they always possessed a contemptuous mindset towards them due to their low position in the Hindu caste hierarchy. At the same time, the Namasudras had to suffer from economic oppression by upper-caste Hindu *zamindars*. The leaders of the Namasudras were not interested in the movements led by upper-caste Hindus. They not only refused to participate in the boycott and *Swadeshi* movement but, on several occasions and at different places, actively opposed the movements.<sup>48</sup> Some liberal-educated Muslim leaders like Barrister Abdul Rasul, Liakat Hussain, Abul Kasem of Burdwan, Ismail Husain Siraji, and Muhammed Akram Khan came forward and participated in the anti-partition movement. But, as a whole, the Muhammadans refused to take part in the *Swadeshi* agitation together with the upper-caste Bengali Hindus.<sup>49</sup> Salimullah Khan, the Nawab of Dacca, sought the assistance of the *Mullas* and the *Maulvis* and launched huge campaigns to disintegrate the boycott movement. Besides the Muslims, the Hindu cultivating castes refrained from participating in the *Swadeshi* movement. The Mahishyas of Midnapur organized Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, and the Rajbansis of North Bengal organized Rajbansi Kshatriya Samiti, and remained confined, claiming higher social status for their castes.<sup>50</sup>

The Namasudras identified the *Swadeshi* movement as an agitation of the *Babus* against the British. The *Swadeshi* strongholds in the East Bengal countryside – Bakarganj, Madaripur, Vikrampur, and Kishoregunj – were the concentrated areas of the Hindu *Bhadraloks*.<sup>51</sup> Guruchand Thakur, the farsighted Namasudra leader, advised his followers not to take part in the *Swadeshi* movement.<sup>52</sup> His eldest son, Shashi Bhusan Thakur, made contact with Salimullah Khan, the Nawab of Dacca. They decided together that the Muslims and the Namasudras would refrain from supporting the movement against the partition of Bengal, and both communities would jointly resist any move for its attainment.<sup>53</sup> Both the Muslims and the Namasudras were aware of their overwhelming numerical superiority over the rest of the Hindus in Eastern Bengal, and they were confident enough that any movement against the British government would be nosedived without their active participation. The numerical strength of the Namasudras and the Muslims in Eastern Bengal can be observed in the table below: -

**Table-3**  
**Numerical Strength of the Muslims and Namasudras in Eastern Bengal<sup>54</sup>**

District	Muslim Population	Namasudra Population	Hindu Population	Percentage of Namasudras among the Hindus	Combined percentage of Muslims and Namasudras among total Population
Dacca	1649639	235542	988075	23.84	71.47
Mymensing	2795548	155883	1088857	14.32	75.98
Faridpur	1199351	324135	733555	44.19	78.82
Bakarganj	1565024	318188	713800	44.58	82.64
Tippera	1494020	115413	622339	18.55	76.05
Noakhali	866290	27452	274474	10.00	78.35
Nadia	982987	37695	676391	5.57	61.51
Jessore	1110236	174835	701889	24.91	70.92
Khulna	632216	190507	619123	30.77	65.75
Rajshahi	1135202	28218	325111	8.68	79.67
Rangpur	1371430	39792	776646	5.12	65.70
Pabna	1062914	49194	357065	13.78	78.32

The awareness and confidence of the Muslims and the Namasudras about their numerical superiority over the rest of the Hindus in Bengal produced a spirit of defiance among them against their economic and social discrimination. Both the East Bengal Muslims and the Namasudras held a

strong agrarian grievance against the upper-caste Hindu *zamindars*. A large number of Namasudras were employed as sharecroppers or agricultural labourers in the districts of Dacca, Faridpur, Bakarganj, Khulna, and Jessore. The Muslim peasants expressed their agrarian grievances in the form of communal outbursts. On the other hand, the Namasudras channelized their agrarian and social discontents into a broader mass protest against the social indignity imposed on them. The Namasudras were a humble cultivating caste 'characterised by an unusual amount of independence and self-reliance.'<sup>55</sup> During the *Swadeshi* movement in 1906, they refused to participate in any agitation called by the Hindu *Bhadraloks* and passed a resolution asserting that: simply owing to the dislike and hatred of the Brahmins, the Vaidyas, and the Kayasthas that this vast Namasudra community has remained backward; this community has, therefore, had not the least sympathy with them and their agitation, and will henceforth work hand in hand with their Mahomedan brethren.<sup>56</sup>

The Hindu *Bhadraloks* felt the importance of the Namasudras while staging the *Swadeshi* movement against the British government. The majority of the native census enumerators and officials of Bengal were from the upper-caste Hindus. They became alarmed about the growing numerical strength of the Muslims in Bengal. The Muslim population in Bengal had been leaving the Hindus behind since 1872, and by 1901, they were ahead of the Hindus by a strength of 17,99,281 souls, which can be observed from the table below:-

**Table-4**  
**Strength of Muslims and Hindus: 1872-1901<sup>57</sup>**

Year	Muslim	Hindu
1872	1,76,09,135	1,81,00,438
1881	1,83,94,426	1,80,71,296
1891	2,01,74,832	1,89,78,300
1901	2,19,54,955	2,01,55,674

The fast-growing Muslim population and their opposition to the anti-partition movement in Bengal compelled the *Bhadralok* Hindus to appeal to the Namasudras to take part in the movement against the British government. But the vast majority of the Namasudras were not ready to make any move against the British because they greatly benefited from the administrative policies of the colonial government. The *Swadeshi* leaders realized the political importance of the Muslims and the Namasudras and tried to mobilize them through both persuasion and coercion. Ambika Charan Mujumdar, the *zamindar* of Faridpur, and Ashwini Kumar Datta, the *zamindar* of Barisal, were especially active in this regard. However, both the Muslims and the Namasudras were found to lack spontaneous response. Prof. Sumit Sarkar has observed: '... peasants were occasionally mobilized for *Swadeshi* meetings, shy

and silent participants in loin cloth roped in by the well-dressed babus to prove Hindu-Muslim unity.<sup>58</sup> The Christian missionaries performed a commendable job among the Namasudras through their benevolent measures, including economic assistance. In collaboration with the government relief workers, they played an important role in rescuing the famine-hit Namasudra peasants residing in the marshy tracts of Faridpur and Bakarganj in 1906. On the other hand, it was alleged that the Swadeshi Bandhab Samiti of Aswini Kumar Datta was used for the benefit of the *Bhadralok* classes while conducting relief and rescue operations.<sup>59</sup>

The political campaigns of Ambika Charan Mujumdar in Faridpur produced very little impact on the Namasudras. It was reported that Nagarbasi Majumdar and Raghunath Sarkar, two influential Namasudra leaders of Dacca, claimed special favour from the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal for the Namasudras and assured their loyalty to the British government. Besides, in the year 1907, when the *Swadeshi* movement was at its highest magnitude, a deputation of Namasudra representatives called on the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal and prayed for the perpetuation of British rule.<sup>60</sup> The *Babu* leaders of Bengal were trying to steer the *Swadeshi* movement without offering any alternative to the market economy. The imported British goods were cheaper than the indigenous goods. The poor Namasudras and Muslims' options were limited to foreign goods. The traders of Bengal could understand that the marketing of *Swadeshi* goods was nothing but a utopian scheme. The wealthy Saha merchants of Eastern Bengal organized a Mahajan Samiti and initially decided not to sell foreign goods during the *Swadeshi* movement, expecting a more sympathetic attitude of the higher castes to their social claims. They discovered very soon that 'this only meant a diminution of their profit, but not an improvement of their social status. Consequently, during the later years of the *Swadeshi* movement, we find most of the Saha merchants dealing openly in foreign goods.'<sup>61</sup>

As a great visionary, Guruchand Thakur realized that the ongoing anti-British movement was detrimental to the interests of the Namasudras. He convinced the Namasudras that the partition of Bengal would not affect them and that the *Swadeshi* movement would not be beneficial for the poor Namasudra peasants. He further clarified that the indigenous goods were costlier compared to foreign goods, and hence, the *Swadeshi* movement would put an extra burden on the shoulders of the poor Namasudras. Guruchand explained to his followers that the *Swadeshi* leaders who were seeking the support of the Namasudras never uttered a single word against the oppression of the *zamindars* and the social disabilities suffered by them. The *Swadeshi Babus* should have annihilated the ongoing social injustices against the Namasudras before asking for their support.<sup>62</sup> The arguments of Guruchand Thakur were affirmed by Debiprasanna Raychaudhuri while delivering his presidential address at the Faridpur District Conference in March 1908, where he laid special emphasis on the need for work among the Muslim and Namasudra peasantry.<sup>63</sup>

Guruchand Thakur made his fellow caste men understand that the time was not ripe for any political movement for them since political freedom is meaningless to the ignorant. For this reason, he advised the Namasudras to get an education since he realized that only education could bring them socio-economic progress.<sup>64</sup> Following the advice of Guruchand, the Namasudra leaders demanded greater opportunities in the fields of education, employment, and representation before the colonial authorities. As the Bengali intellectuals practically did nothing for the progress of the Namasudras, their leaders asked them for caste solidarity and self-help. They developed an interest in Western education and social reforms among their caste. In 1908, a Namasudra Conference was held in Jessore to prepare plans for educational and social reforms within their caste.<sup>65</sup> A similar conference was also held in Nadia District in March of the same year.<sup>66</sup>

The *Bhadralok* activists took no initiative to redress the grievances of the Namasudras. They only uttered hollow promises. At the Barisal District Conference held on August 17–18, 1908, no substantive roadmap was drawn for the economic and social advancement of the Namasudra peasants. Not a single word was uttered about accepting food and water from the hands of the Namasudras—a social demand of the Namasudras since the 1880s.<sup>67</sup> Since the *Swadeshi* agitators showed no sincere initiative to open schools in the Namasudra-dominated areas, Guruchand Thakur appealed to Dr. C.S. Mead, the Australian Baptist Missionary, to visit Orakandi to spread education among the Namasudras. On the initiative of Guruchand and Dr. Mead, the High English School was founded at Orakandi, 'the most influential center of the Nama Sudra World' in Faridpur District in 1908.<sup>68</sup> The Namasudras remained aloof from the *Swadeshi* leaders despite repeated appeals to them. In March 1908, a Namasudra Conference demanded 'freedom of trade', and by the summer of that year, Muslims and Namasudras of Barisal were reported to be buying foreign cloth and salt even where these were more expensive than their *Swadeshi* equivalents.<sup>69</sup>

The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 produced new hope among the Namasudras. They felt that their political rights would be safeguarded by the British government in the near future through reservations in representative bodies. That is why they were in no mood to participate in any movement against the British rulers. In 1909, the Namasudras and Muhammadans of the Narail subdivision went for a 'practical protest' against higher caste Hindus for the low opinion in which they were held by them. The Namasudra-Muslim combine denied working as menial servants in the houses of the upper caste Hindus or eating food cooked by them. In some parts of the Magura Subdivision, the Namasudras refused to serve in the houses of the higher-class Hindus or cultivate their lands.<sup>70</sup> The animosity between the Hindu *Bhadraloks* and the East Bengal Namasudras during the *Swadeshi* movement went to an extreme extent when a Namasudra-Muslim alliance against the Brahmin-Kayastha combination at a village near Khulna ultimately attacked a police party with spears, shields, and sticks.<sup>71</sup>

Ambika Charan Mujumdar started a campaign to win over the Namasudras of Faridpur District in 1910 by promises of upliftment to higher social rank but success in Bakarganj was limited.<sup>72</sup> In the districts of Jessore and Faridpur, the upper-caste *Swadeshi* activists launched propaganda among the Namasudras with the offer that the Brahmins would relax the rigidity of caste in favour of those who took the *Swadeshi* vow. It is stated that the *Swadeshi* leaders succeeded in pulling the Namasudras into their fold from several villages. However, the vast majority of the Namasudras remained detached from the *Swadeshi* movement.<sup>73</sup> In January 1910, the Namasudras held meetings in different parts of the Tangail Sub-division at which they resolved not to serve the Kayasthas in any manner. The Kayasthas, in return, decided not to let land or lend money to the Namasudra peasants. Such tension between the two camps continued at least up to the beginning of 1911.<sup>74</sup>

The partition of Bengal in 1905 sharply stirred the society of Bengal. The upper-caste, educated Bengalis strongly opposed the split of the province. They launched campaigns against the British government to show their grievance against the division. The boycott of British goods and the use of only indigenous products (*Swadeshi*) were their two major weapons against the colonial authorities. The *Bhadralok* Hindu castes realized that any anti-British agitation would be nosedived without the active participation of the Muslims and low-caste Hindus on account of their huge numerical strength. That is why they appealed to the Muslims and the Namasudras to take part in the anti-partition movement together with them. The Muslims and the Namasudras held a long-standing agrarian discontent against the *Bhadralok zamindars*. The upper-caste Hindus despised the Namasudras through the ages, imposing upon them the stigma of 'Chandal'. They discriminated against the Namasudras in different ways and never acknowledged their civil rights. On the contrary, the British government was sympathetic to their grievances. During the indigo disturbances, the British rulers heard from the Bengal peasants, among whom the Namasudras were a numerous group. The British administration stopped the forceful cultivation of indigo in response to their demand. The colonial government approved many of their demands, including the deletion of the 'Chandal' stigma from their caste. In the fields of education and public employment, the government opened closed doors for them and produced new aspirations in their minds. The vast majority of the Namasudras rejected the repeated appeals of the *Bhadralok* Hindus to join in the anti-partition movements and many places opposed the *Swadeshi* leaders jointly with the Muslims. They were not ready to side with the *Swadeshi Babus* in any agitation against the British government. In this way, the Namasudras demonstrated not only their lack of confidence in the Hindu *Bhadraloks* but also their protest against them, who had despised them till recently and had never recognized their civil rights, viewing them as an untouchable community.

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