

THE 'SELF-DIGNITY' MOVEMENT OF EIGHTEEN SEVENTY THREE: CASTE, PROTEST AND SOCIAL BOYCOTT OF THE NAMASUDRAS OF BENGAL

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ABSTRACT:

In pre-colonial Indian traditional society, lower castes peoples or untouchables were socially discrimination, hated and economically exploited by high caste Hindu elites. Caste system also violates human rights and dignity of untouchable- downtrodden peoples in India. This paper seeks a protest movement of 1873 against caste system and Brahmanism, articulated untouchable caste *Namasudras (Chandalas)*, numerically largest caste group in Hindus society in Eastern Bengal. The *Namasudras* emerged as strong agricultural community and organized themselves with new hope of well-being, and urge for dignity and self-respect in late 19th century. The self-dignity movement of 1873 in Bengal was successful in respect of establishing their equality before law of British imperialistic administration.

Key Words: Caste system, *Namasudras (Chandalas)*, Brahmin hegemony, Rights of equality.

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Introduction:

Protecting human rights of the modern day people and working for their all round development and growth are closely associated with establishing of justice for all and ensuring them of equal respects. But the caste system in Hindu society and being the victim of caste distinction since one's birth is the biggest impediment in establishing Human rights for all as the system of caste distinction among the Hindus is the root cause of institutionalizing the inequality among the Hindu religious society.¹ The scripture dictated various religious systems and procedures have been indiscriminately imposed upon various castes.² The High caste Brahmins (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya) took the advantages of the scriptures dictated discriminating manners and customs in depriving the Sudras and outcaste people from their religious and socio-economic rights and in the process established their supremacy on wealth, respect and power and had been able in creating a state with their feudal society at the helm of it.³ At different times, the low caste tribes in their effort to get relief from the exploitation of the Brahmins and disrespect in the Hindu society tried to gain respect through the process of 'Sanskritization' ⁴ According to ethnological interpretation of 'Aryan and non-Aryan', the Aryan was able to keep their Brahmanical supremacy over the non-Aryan Indian as per the dictum depicted in the Vedic religious scriptures. And the antagonism of Aryan and non-Aryan, initiated a movement under the leadership of Jyoti Rao Phule who preached for acquiring self-respect for the non-Aryan sudras and the tribes under the banner of 'Satyashodhak Samaj'.⁵

In 1925, a movement was started in the banner of 'Justice Party' under the leadership of Perrier Ramswamy Naikar to reestablish the glorious traditions of ancient Tamil Dravidian culture rejecting Vedic Sanskrit religious culture and its caste distinction.⁶ In Bengal, the so-called *Chandal* or *Namasudras* were included among the aboriginal 'Banga' tribe. With the introduction of Brahmanical religious and social systems and procedures, the castes under the original 'Banga' tribe were classified as 'Adhamshankar', untouchables and social outclass. In 1872-73 through the 'Maryada' (Self-Dignity) movement, the *Chandals* of Bengal revolted and created a powerful social boycott movement against the economic exploitation, deprivation and also against the social disrespect showered on them by the high caste people of the society. The 'Atma Maryada' movement in 1873 gave a tremendous jolt to the Brahmanical supremacy and on the other side it created a united and strong organization among the chandals and steered the community towards power.

Ancient history of 'Chandala' or 'Namasudra':

On the north of gangetic delta was 'Poundra' and the eastern side was inhabited by the ancient tribe, 'Banga'. In the 'Arthashastra' (economics) of Koutilya, the mention of the 'Banga' tribe.(321-300 B.C) could be found and in 'Eaiter Aranyak',(Purana) the names of three tribes viz 'Banga', 'Bagadh' and 'Cher' also did appear. ⁷As per the names of the 'Poundra' and 'Banga', the names 'Bangadesh' and 'Poundradesh' were made. Those who were part of Austric tribes, Non-Aryan outside the 'Aryabarta' and those who resided in 'Pragjyotishpur' or in the land of Nishad' used to talk in Austro-Asiatic language. ⁸ The Vedic Aryans did not consider it prudent to move along Magadha or on the further east where the barbaric non-Aryan resided. In spite of that, Vedic literature, culture and the scriptures depicting the religious manners and customs were included in the social life of 'Bangadesh' ⁹ Before that, 'Banga' and 'Poundra' people were followers of 'Buddhist' and 'Jain' religion and for that reason 'Banga' in the religious scriptures of the Buddhist and Jain were described as a land devoid of Brahmins. ¹⁰ During the rule of 'Sen' kings, many among the different tribes/clans of Bengal converted to Hinduism but the 'Poundra' and 'Banga' tribes did not quit Buddhism instantaneously and lived in some parts of the province where they were known by their profession such as 'Halbaha', 'Ghasi', 'Karal', 'Berua', 'Baggal', 'Shiala', 'Karati', 'Jalia' etc. ¹¹

According to 'Brahmabaibartapuram' and 'Brihad Dharmapuram' written in the twelfth century, the Sudras were divided into three classes viz 'Satsudra', 'Ashat sudra' and 'Adham Antajya' on the plea of improper cross breeding among their tribes and the people under the 'Banga' tribe were described as 'Chandal', 'Abarana'(Out caste) and 'Adhamsankar'. ¹² Since that time the 'Banga' tribe were known as much hated 'Chandal' 'Abarana' or the 'Adhamsankar' though as per 'Chandal Jatitatta' (Theiry of Chandala) of Manu, tribes of 'Banga' were laterally much different in respect of profession, food habits, and as per the anthropological parameters of the Manu described Chandal. ¹³ The so called habitants of 'Banga' were neither engaged in the job of burying corpse or lived in graveyard. ¹⁴ In spite of that, in the medieval religious scriptures and by the high caste people in the society, they were addressed and hated as 'Naradham', 'Durbitta', 'Atiadham', and 'Acchhut' or untouchables. ¹⁵ On the same reason, they were not allowed to enter into any temple and the Brahmin priest did not participate in any of their welfare work. ¹⁶

Background of the “Self-Dignity” movement:

Although due to supremacy of the Brahmins the ‘Banga’ tribe were described as Chandals, untouchables, abominable race etc in the society but among them a section on the north of Bhowal like Raja Pratap Roy and Raja Prasanna Roy and the wealthy Buddhist Chandal in Rajshahi were considered as respected people in the society.¹⁷ But in the medieval period, a section of the low caste Chandals embraced Islam as their religion because of facing hatred in the society continually as outclass people and also to get themselves free from discrimination and self indignation. Islam was much more acceptable to the so called Chandal and other low caste people as a religion better known for its equality and also as a religion of plough (As Islam that time was much more emphatic on profession rather than on religious rituals etc) than the disrespect and lack of human rights imposed on them by the Brahmins of the Hindu society.¹⁸ On the sixteenth century, the low caste people were attracted by the class less ‘Vaishnab’ religion founded by Chaitanya and joined it. But later after Chaitanya, Vaishnab religion again reverted back to Brahministic manners and custom and was known as “*Brahmin Vaishnab*’ religion.¹⁹ At that juncture, the chandal and other low caste people appeared as a group known as ‘Gounyadharmiya’ with the object to free themselves from sectoral hatred and disrespect.²⁰

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, due to various religious and social procedures and prohibitions imposed on them, apathy and exploitation by the high class people of the society, a sense of oneness or a separate sect nee nationality got ignited amongst the Chandals. From that sense, they realized that they had become untouchable and had been devoid of the right to take drinking water, education, from pursuing in respectable profession and from human rights due to prohibitions imposed on them by the higher caste people. They had been forced to live the life a coward due to dirtiest and ugliest treatment of the high caste people castigated on them through ages. Rabindra Nath Tagore also put his observations this way that without any fault of their own, as per religious command made by the upper castes Brahmins, the *namasudras* were totally ignored, subjected to be chained in unbearable pain since their birth to death in the black hole of total subservience and that was the mechanism of the upper caste to keep them crippled throughout their entire life.²¹ James Long, the Principal of Burdwan Church Missionary School complained the students of high caste even the Brahmin teachers refused sit on the same seat with the students of Low castes.²² The *Chandals* of Dacca, Barishal, Moymensingh and Srihatta were not allowed to cover their head with umbrella, to wear shoes and

even ride on a palanquin. Once a rich Namasudra wearing shoes entered into a house of a high caste Hindu in the village of Pardagahar in Dacca. He was insulted by the high caste Hindus for wearing shoes. Once a newly wed Chandal bride rode on a palanquin and she was forced to get down from the palanquin by the high caste Hindus.²³ In a protest against all those incidents, the local Chandals got united and in Subhaddya village of Dacca district, under the leadership of a rich Namasudra named Ramkinkar, the Namasudras did everything that they were prohibited to do i.e. wear shoes, used umbrellas and rode in palanquin in protest against the prohibition imposed by the upper class Hindus.²⁴ In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Namasudras of Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur, Bakherganj, Dacca and Moyminsingh were majority among the Hindu society and they emerged as a race of peasants in the society.²⁵ But the upper caste Hindu Zaminders and the Syed Muslims who were owners of the agricultural land exploited and tortured the Chandals by imposing high tax on the users of the land by implementing illegal abwab. In 1885, the high caste Zaminders forced them to relinquish their right to cultivate the land on the plea of either not paying the taxes or to increase the taxes on the land.²⁶ But in the later period with the emerging of the chandals as 'a peasant caste' they got aware of the socio-economic exploitation inflicted on them.²⁷ On the other side with the transition of the socio-religious traditions of the 'Banga' race, they got introduced with the liberal socio-religious thoughts of Buddhism, Vaishnav religion and with the liberal thoughts of the Muslim Sufi, Sant and Christian missionaries. They dared to go out of the immaterial customs and practices of Hinduism and got material strength. They realized that the orthodox Hindu society always ignored the peasants and forced them to live outside the villages.²⁸ Power, Official status and wealth were in the hand of the feudalistic upper class society and that strength empowered them to make the Chandal peasants as land slave. At that time the upper class people used the service of the Namasudras as porter and introduced them as slave.²⁹ To get themselves relieved from the apathy, misbehavior, languor of disrespect and taunting of the upper class people, the Namasudras made various movements against the supremacy of the upper class people with the only hope of living with respects and were able to emerge as a separate dignified class which worked as the foundation of their self-respect. James Scott described the process as 'Alternative discourse of dignity'.³⁰

The Planning of Self-Dignity movement and its expansion:

At the end of 1872 and on the first part of 1873, a strong and organized social boycott movement got initiated in the Namasudra inhabited areas of Faridpur and Bakherganj. A rich Namasudra, Dwaraka Nath Mondal in the village of Aamgram of Maslandpur area in Faridpur planned a grand feast of 10,000 people on the occasion of his deceased father's Last rites and the invitation made by him to the Kayasthas were refused by them with utter hatred and disrespect. The Kayasthas complained that the Namasudras were untouchables and Chandals, their women were used to go to the market places and in Jail they were used to work as scavengers. So, the Kayasthas tried to establish that taking part in a mass feast with such type of low class people was tantamount to disrespect to them. ³¹ *Dwarakanath* felt insulted at that incident and he convened a meeting of the village heads of the Namasudra inhabited villages where it was resolved that I) the womenfolk of Namasudra family would not go to the market places II) They would not take in any work of the upper caste Hindus and Muslims III) They would not dine with upper class Hindus except the Brahmins. ³² Those apart, it was also resolved that protests would be made in appointments of Chandal convicts as scavengers. In the local society, they would stop working in the homes of the upper class Hindus, to plough and harvest in their land and would refrain themselves from giving any type of labour till they were not allowed to have equal rights and respects. ³³ The 'Sanskritization' process to get oneself included in the upper caste was not in the agenda of their movement rather they demanded a place where there was no untouchability and recognition and rites as a labour. ³⁴ They informed the District Magistrate that since Liberal British Government declared that everybody was equal before the law so they should refrain from forcibly appointing the Chandals only as scavengers in Jail. ³⁵ The epicenter of that movement was in Moksudpur in Faridpur district and in the Kashiani area. The movement rapidly spread in Bakherganj, Jessore and in Khulna districts. The organization for the movement also took the decision to help the poor Namasudra financially by the relatively rich Namasudra relatives so that they did not face any difficulty during the period of the movement. If the relatives were not able to help, the 'Gram Samity' (Village Committee) would help them so that the movement did not get weakened. In spite of that if any Chandal worked for the upper class people, he or she would be declassed from the Namasudra society. ³⁶ In the local weekly market, the plan of the movement and the decision taken were circulated by attracting the attention of the sellers and buyers assembled in the market by beating the drums. After the movement of social

boycott and blockade was declared, it continued for four months in the Namasudra dominated five districts in East Bengal. After four months the district magistrate of the affected districts observed that due to the movements, there was no cultivation made in the cultivable lands. The houses of the upper caste people could not be repaired. The women of the *Chandal* family could not be observed in the market places. In Goplalganj and Moksudpur, the movement took a violent turn which resulted in deploying additional police force in those areas.³⁷ Fourteen Village chieftains informed Mr.W.S.Wells that they would neither do the work of the upper class people nor would they allow other chandals to do so unless and until they received respects and humanly behaviors from them.³⁸ Likewise, the Chandal prisoners in jail also stopped working as scavengers. The movement inside the jail was able to attract the attention of the Government very sharply.³⁹

The nature of the movement and its consequence:

Though the movement of Social boycott went peacefully for four months but the leadership and the organizers of the movements compelled the poor Namasudras to join the movement. At last, due to financial difficulties and organizational weakness, the poor chandals were forced to resume their work with many adverse terms without gaining social justice and the desired liberty from the menace of untouchability. But it was evident that due to the boycott movement, landowners and Zaminders became helpless. During his visits in Barishal, Bhatiapara, Gournadi, Putiadi, and Gohakhan areas, the district magistrate, Mr.Welles was told by the upper caste people that they were solely dependent on chandal peasants for cultivation and other works and their lavish life style were mostly dependent on the production of agricultural goods.⁴⁰

On the other side, the British were put under pressure in regard to their stand on equal rights to all as per the law, especially inside the jail as the Chandals were deprived of equal rights and were given the menial works to perform inside the jail only on consideration of caste system. The Inspector of Alipore Jail, Mr.D.M.Bose and the Mr.W.L.Heely of Faridpur Jail did not want to intervene against the caste system of Hinduism but later they succumbed to the intensity and pressure of the movement and declared that nobody could be forced to work as scavenger but all imprisoned persons should be deployed equally irrespective of their caste for maintaining the hygiene of the environment of the Jail.⁴¹ As a consequence, the district magistrate of Faridpur

advocated to the jail inspector of lower province in favour of an enactment to treat all the prisoners equally, making an end to the discrimination to the *Chandals* only.⁴² Likewise, the district magistrate of Darjeeling, Mr. Mackenzib advised the jail inspector of Bengal province and lower province that the Lieutenant Governor should make a proposal so that no person could be forced to take the job of a scavenger or a sweeper.⁴³ On 10th June, 1873, Governor General L.C. Abbot made a proclamation of equal respect in respect of all jail inmates regarding their appointments of various jobs.⁴⁴ Accordingly, the *Chandals* gained their equal rights according to the law.

Conclusion: Complete appraisal

In conclusion, in the ancient Bangladesh, the people of Austro-Asiatic language group were mainly followers of Jain and Buddhist religion. In the later period, to expand the Brahmin dominated Hindu religion in the Bangladesh; they were depicted as Chandal, untouchables and outcaste people. During the entire medieval period, they tried to get themselves free from the dishonor and social evils emanated on them from the supremacy of the caste distinction of the Hindu society and desired to gain socio-religious justice sometimes by embracing Islam and sometime by entering into the arena of liberal Vaishanva religion. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Chandals were able to emerge as an agriculturist class and could realize that the reason behind their deplorable condition in the society was due to the socio-economic exploitation by the upper class Hindus. The self respect movement of the Namasudras initiated from their desire for emancipation from the social injustice and socio-economic exploitation by the upper caste people and the movement advanced them towards the path of self-determination.⁴⁵ The hierarchies of the Namasudra leadership of the movement did not object in taking food with the Brahmin in the hope of getting the same prominence as that of Brahmin in the society. But in their movement or in the charter of demands, there was no mention of 'Sanskritization'⁴⁶ process. The proposal was important in respect of getting instant social respect from the Brahmin because in the then society the sacredness of a class was measured on the stand of the Brahmins about that particular society. The Brahmins did not preside over the religious occasions of the sudras and other low class and that was why they were not considered as a noble class in the society.⁴⁷

Due to the movement, the Namasudras could neither get out of the social tag of '*Chandal*' nor were they relieved from being treated as untouchables. But in the background of

socio-economic exploitation of the upper caste and deprivation by them, the movement developed as an agrarian cum class dimension character which in later stage helped and united the chandals to come under one umbrella and developed among them a sense of social and cultural identity.⁴⁸ The 'Self respect; movement was successful in establishing equity in the primary period of the British imperialistic administration and the movement of 1873 took the pioneering role in making the foundation of the political movement of the Namasudra. The movement with the active co-operation of the British government helped them to get education and governmental service. They also took the help of the British for their socio-economic development and took initiative for religious and social reform devoid of the supremacy of the Brahmin. The *Matua* movement bloomed over the foundation of the self consciousness which grew from its movement of 1873.

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