

# Problem of Caste and Identity: The Namasudras of Colonial India

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**Abstract:** *Identity is the sense of being or of becoming a badge that distinguish one from others. Human identity is a universal that is often treated as self evident and problematic. As a concept, it is linked to state identity, national identity, ethnic, tribal, individual or personal identity etc. The identification of members of the group on the basis of sharing common attributes on the basis of all or some of the attributes, languages, gender, religion, culture, ethnicity etc. indicates the existence or formation of identity. The state is seen as an active contributor to identity politics through creation and maintenance of state structure which defines and recognizes people in terms of certain identities. Hence we find that identity questions of various caste and communities around in India are based on language, religion, caste, ethnicity or tribal identity. Identity crisis had become one of the most serious issues in colonial and post colonial India. Every ethnic group seeks to assert their ethno-based identity. Like other communities, the Namasudra communities of North Bengal also faced identity problem for a long period of time. Initially, their efforts to protect own ethnic identity was democratic and peaceful in nature.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Protest, Namasudra, Ethnicity, Social upliftment

## 1. Introduction

Identity is the sense of being or of becoming a badge that distinguish one from others. Human identity is a universal that is often treated as self evident and problematic. As a concept, it is linked to state identity, national identity, ethnic, tribal, individual or personal identity etc. The identification of members of the group on the basis of sharing common attributes on the basis of all or some of the attributes, languages, gender, religion, culture, ethnicity etc. indicates the existence or formation of identity. Identity consists of the answer to the question to who am I (are we) and what do I (we) identify? It refers to the 'I/we' feeling of individuals / collectives emanating from the mutual recognition of the interaction of like and unlike units. Ethnic identity is usually based on a combination of several factors of a tangible and non-tangible nature. These includes amongst others, a common culture, (including common values and norms ), a common language, a common religion, a consciousness of a group solidarity, historical destiny and emotional commitment regarding shared territory, history etc.

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Actually identity crisis had become one of the most serious issues in colonial and post colonial India. Every ethnic group seeks to assert their ethno-based identity. Like other communities, the Namasudras communities of North Bengal also faced identity problem for a long period of time. Initially, their efforts to protect own ethnic identity was democratic and peaceful in nature.

The identity of the Namasudra community is a historical phenomenon and not a given or natural thing. Every community has their special identity and ethnographic

history, which helps other to have clear understanding and to take necessary steps for the development of that particular community. In an attempt to establish the historical origin and emergence of the Namasudra communities of Bengal, it is important to probe the origin of the term Namasudra. How can the Namasudra community be classified from others community? How do this community evolve in the society?

The origin of the word 'Namasudra', which is not mentioned in any of the pre-nineteenth century medieval Bengal literature, is extremely uncertain. Colonial ethnologist like James Wise, and H. H. Risley believed that the word 'Namasudra' was derived either from the Sanskrit word 'namas' or 'adoration' or the Bengali word 'namate' i, e, *below or underneath*. [1] In the first case it would mean those who were bound to show obeisance even to the Sudras. In the second case, the word would perhaps mean a lower grade or Sudras, a status the Chandalas of Manu had gained promotion but these two explanations appear to be highly improbable in view of the new sense of self-respect associated with the Namasudra identity.

## 2. The Namasudras in pre-colonial records:

The different synonymous of the Namasudras are 'Chandal', 'Charal', 'Namasud' and 'Namah'. [2] The word Chandala, as surmised by Ballal Sen, ruler of Sena dynasty of Bengal, used as a generic term, to refer to all the lower caste people. [3] Since it is absolutely impossible to establish that they had descended from the particular mixed caste called Chandala described in the post Vedic Dharmasutra literature, it is perhaps logical to say that they were just being referred to as such because of their low social position from other Hindus. Their low social status was possibly the result of their late incorporation into Hindu society.

According to Manu, [4] the sexual intercourse between a Sudra man and a Brahman woman resulted in a Chandal offspring. In the code of conduct said down by Manu, we find that it was prescribed that the Chandals should live

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outside the villages, should not possess water pots. They should wear clothes discarded by the dead and adorn themselves with ornaments made of iron and could not enter any socio-religious functions organised by the high caste. Marriage and financial transaction should be limited within themselves or within their own castes. Bengal Chandals or Namasudras were not same characters Manu point out, hence they were treated as untouchables and exploitation, hatred, discrimination and neglect were all that they deserved from the Brahmanic social structure. [5]

After the Aryan settlement, when the caste system began to stabilize and consolidate itself in the post vedic age i.e., the age of Dharmasutra, such marginal groups as the Chandals came to be regarded as untouchables, with severe restrictions imposed on all kinds of physical contact with them. The exact word 'asprisyā', the Sanskrit equivalent of 'untouchables' seems to have appeared sometime between the third and the six centuries of the Christian era, when the Chandals had come to constitute the fifth or the Panchama varna, a permanent underclass at the bottom of the Hindu social pyramid. Even the ascendancy of Buddhism and Jainism does not appear to have improved their position to any appreciable extent. [6]

A general study of the Chandals observes that they were one of the several disadvantage groups of early Indian society whose condition had been gradually deteriorating since the later Vedic age (c.1000 BC – 600 BC.). Initially they were looked at just as one of many indigenous tribes living on the periphery of immigrant Aryan settlements. But as the caste system began to stabilise and consolidate itself in the post Vedic age i.e., the age of Dharmasutras such marginal groups as the Chandals came to be regarded as untouchables, with the severe restrictions imposed on all kinds of physical contact with them. They came to be regarded not only as a *Varnasankra* or a mixed caste, but as the lowest among the offsprings of a pratiloma or hypogamous union of a Sudra male and Brahman women. Between 200BC. And 200 A.D., 'Manusmriti' further reiterated the polluted origin of the Chandals to justify their relegation to the category of niravastu or excluded Sudras, who were obliged to live outside the village. The *Brahmavaivarttapuranam* and the *Brihaddharmapurānam*, the two thirteenth-fourteenth century texts, refer to the Chandals of Bengal as an antyaja or a low born mixed caste or *sankarajati*, but do not give any definite indication that they were held to be untouchables. Even Raghunandan, [7] who is regarded as the most conservative *Smritikara* of sixteenth century of Bengal speaks of restriction on connubial and commensal relation with the Chandals, but does not appear to be insisting that their touch must be avoided by all means. On the other hand, the literary evidence of the *Mangalakavya* [8] of the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries clearly suggests, without any ambiguity, that the Chandals lived within the precincts of the city and were not the dwellers of the periphery as enjoyed by Manu.

### 3. Namasudras as reflected in pre-Colonial Bengali Texts

The Namasudra themselves were also confused about the meaning of the term 'Namasudra'. Sashi Kumar Badoi

Biswas [9] thought that the word could mean two things: *namaskar* and *paying obeisance* to and *tyaja* or to be *avoided*. If the word was used in the first sense, than it would be mean those who paid obeisance to the sudras. None of the meaning however seemed to be acceptable to him, though he failed to arrive a definite conclusion. According to another Namasudra commentator, Naresh Chandra Das [10], the word means the sudras who were paid obeisance to an explanation which seems to be the most plausible of all. Dr. James Wise [11] suggest that the word 'Namasudra' may be derived from the Sanskrit *Namas*, ( *adoration*) which is always used as a vocative when *praying*, or the Bengali *Namate*, (*below underneath*). The latter suggestion seems to more plausible. The Pandits interpretation of the former is understood to be that the Chandal is bound to do obeisance even to a Sudra. It would be promotion for the Chandals of Manu to get themselves recognised as a lower grade of Sudras. The name may also be referred to *Namasa* or *Lomasa Muni*, whom some Chandals regard as their mythical ancestor. On the other hand, *Namasa Muni* himself may have been evolved from the attempt to explain away the suggestion of inferiority implied in the name Namasudra. Shymacharan Sarkar's 'Vyasnastha Darpan' as a subdivision of Sudra caste [12] explain etymologically this term means a group of respected sudra, 'Naman' means respected, and sudra is a classified section of the people holds the lower strata in the caste strata in the caste society.

### 4. Namasudra and Brahmanas: Debate

According to Tarak Chandra Sarkar, 'The Namasudras are the banished Brahman Buddhists who do not want to change their religion at the time of King Ballal Sen'[13] Namasudras are not Sudra which has been narrated by the different writers such as- Shri Gourpriya Sarkar in his book *Jatitawa Sangraha* [14], Shri Jitedranath Majumdar in his book *Jatitawa and Namasudra Jatir Utpatti*, Shri Jogredra Chandra Majumdar in his book *Namasudra Jati Tatwa Katha*, Shri Sattya Ranjan Sarkar in *Namasudra Jatitattwa*, Shri Sukumar Sarkar in *Namasudra Parsav Bipra* [15], Shri Darakanath Mandal in *Namasudra Jatikatha*, by referring different quotations from various religious books and by putting some example.

Raicharan Biswas in his book *Jatiya Jagaran* written in 1921 observes, 'We are Brammin by caste promoted by envy or anger people may dislike us, but if we observe our clear Brahmanical way of life as practised generation after generation, they will have to admit unanimously that the Namasudra caste is descended from ancient sages and *Rishis* i.e. pure Brahmins. Secondly, our occupation is the 'arya' or the noble one of agriculture and this has always been considered a very profession.' [16] Another Namasudra scholar Nirod Behari Ray writes, 'we are aware that there are many other critics who say that the Namasudras could not be Brahmins as they are endogamous, i.e. they marry within the same *Gotra*'. [17] This argument also cannot stand in the way of the assertion of the Namasudras that they were Brahmins in the past because at least one recognised Brahmin community is known who indulge in the same practice. The endogamous Brahmin community in question is the *Sakadvipi* Brahmins. [18] He also refuted the contention of Nirmal Kumar Bose that *Kachahhapa*

(tortoise) was the ever totem of the Namasudras. Mr. Ray argues that tortoise had never been worshipped by the Namasudras. Besides Risley refers to four gotras amongst the Namasudras viz. Kashyapa, Bharadwaja, Lomasa, and Sandilya. Mr. Roy argues 'even if we accept Risley's version that there are four gotras amongst the Namasudras this puts the final seal on the contention of Sri Bose that *Kachahhapa* or the Tortoise was ever the totem of the Namasudras and therefore his contention ought to be dismissed summarily. [19] On the other hand we have the evidence of the *Sakti Sangama Tantra*, a well known 'Tantrik' work of the 16<sup>th</sup> century where it has been stated that the Namasudras were the offspring of the sage *Namasa*, a descendant of the sage Kashyapa.

Pandit Rajbihari Roy Swarnakar hints in his book *Namasudra Dijattiva* that the Namasudra are Brahmin. They are invited by the king Ballal Sen to preside over his marriage ceremony, but they refused to accept the post of Priest in an inter-caste (Hypergamy) marriage, as because they would be wife was a Dom caste girl. Her name was Padmini. Ballal Sen ordered his soldiers to kill this rebellion group and he declared this group as Sudra. Sri Gostha Bihari Debnath, a Nath teacher and scholar in his Bengali works on Nathaism mentioned 'Namasudra' have been given the position of *Parasava Vipras*. They identify themselves as one of the superior groups, claiming their descent from the purest Brahmin origin. But Hindu society has always despised this agricultural caste. [20]

In the above mentioned books the authors have placed that Namasudras are neither Sudra nor Chandal rather they are Brahmin offspring by birth; but because of some social imposed force they lost their identity as Brahmin and as a result they had to live like a Sudra for their survival.

The Namasudra people are of Brahmin origin which may be accepted from the cultural point of view also. In Manu's Doshakosh Pangika it is mentioned that-

*Namasudra jatakyata sampradaya samvedadhikari!  
Dashadishabadhya souchya palanang purusanakramena  
arjhyrate!*

*Tirth pravashhe grehavashe cha sraddhadi karjhyala!  
Tena pakkanna pindadang bidhi drishyete!* [21]

*[Namasudra communities were the followers of the 'Sam  
Veda' (Vedic Text)!]*

*Over the generation they maintained holiness and purity! Be it a pilgrimage of their own country or foreign land, the rice cooked by the Namasudras could only be offered as a special tribute (namely pinda to the departed souls!]*

It is also known from the *Ballal Charit* that for the sake of a personal promise given to a Dom girl named Padmini to be married, the Bengal emperor Ballal Sen was obligated to invite the Kashyapa Brahmins to attend and participate in the Midday meal party on the very day of engagement ceremony with the girl. But as a result of refusal of the invitation, the armed forces of the king were directed to tear off the 'Holi Brahmin Thread' through force and dexterity. Accordingly the Kashyapiya Brahmins of 'Mulghar were tortured highly physically as well as mentally. These deprived Brahmins were later on entitled as 'Namasudra'

during the time and took the shelter in East, West, South and North Bengal and also in the place of Andaman Nicobar Islands from their Mulghar (presently Josohar in Bangladesh) residential area. During the period of 1158-1179 (Ballal Sen dynasty) the 'Namasudra' of Bengal were deprived and neglected in all terms due to the continuation of ill effect of Sen Times. During that period Ballal Sen conferred the name Chandal in place of Namasudra and Brahmin and he abolished the name Namasudra from all kinds of known religious book forcefully; and he made a rule that those who will not consider Namasudra as Chandal they will be suspended from job and they will be physically punished. [22]

## 5. Debate on the identification of Namasudra with Chandala

According to H.H. Risley [23], the Namasudra derived from *Chandals, Chaurals, Chang, Nama, Nishad* a non-Aryan caste of Eastern Bengal, engaged for the most part in beating and cultivation. The derivation of the name Chandal is uncertain, and it is a name of one of the aboriginal races whom the Aryans found in possession of the soil. Unlike the Sudras, however, the Chandals were debarred from entering even the outer circles of the Aryan system, and from the earliest time they are depicted by Sanskrit writers as an outcast and helot people, performing menial duties for the Brahmanas and living on the outskirts of cities (*antebasi*) a part from the dwellings of the dominant race. Iron ornaments, dogs and monkeys, are their chief wealth, and they cloth themselves in the raiment of the dead.

The Chandals of Bengal as well as the Namasudras were referred to before their more respectable caste name came to be accepted, were portrayed in the early twentieth century *Jatimala* literature as the 'non-Aryan autochthonous people of the land' [24] The theory certainly appears to have been derived from the late nineteenth century racial ethnology of the colonial officials like Herbert Risley, who divided the Indian population into two racial types, the Aryan and the Dravidian, and he held that a tribe was a development out of race, while a caste was a development out of tribe. In Risley's typology the 'Namasudra (Chandals) appeared as *tribal* who had gradually embraced Hinduism, accepted the Hindu social organisation and thus had hardened into a caste. James Wise, [25] 'shortly before him, had observed in a more racist tone that the chandals were a 'Dravidian tribe, who driven before the Aryan invaders, or by later persecution, sought shelter in the marshy forest of Bengal'. That they were once 'a strongly organised commonwealth', he thinks, was further proved by the tradition of tribal state formation among these people a 'Chandala Raja' once ruling in the forest of Bhawal. The tribe in this scheme appears as a tribal chiefdom. Mr. Wells [26] quotes as tradition of Hindu invention, current among the Chandals of Faridpur, to the effect that they originally a complete Hindu community, consisting of persons of all castes, from the Brahman downwards. They on having the misfortune to be cursed in a body by a vengeful Brahman of unutterable sanctity in Dacca quitted their ancestral homes and emigrated bodily to the Southern West of Faridpur, Jessore and Baqirganj. According to Dr. Buchanan [27] the Chandal of Bengal to be identical with the Dosadh of Behar. Although both are

equally low in the scale of caste and characterized by an unusual amount of independence and self reliance, very great difference actually exist. The Dosadh worships defied heroes belonging to his tribe the Chandal never does. The sraddha of the Dosadh is celebrated on the thirtieth day as with the Sudras, that of the Chandal on the eleventh, as with Brahmanas.

Namasudras and Chandals have no similarity in respect of their occupation, food habits, and lifestyle. In 1872 the Namasudras organized a strike in protest against the misbehaviour of the upper caste Hindus. It is reported that an invitation of a rich Namasudra of Bakharganj to all caste was refused by other caste at the instigation of some Kayastha because of their low professions. This incident hurt the members of this community who accordingly, held a meeting and took up the following resolution, (i) they must not send women to markets, (2) they must not serve under the castes and (3) the food prepared by all other caste Hindus except Brahmins will not be accepted by them. [28] The good gesture on the part of the British officials helped them to win over the sympathy and favour of the Namasudras. Similar attitude was reflected in the administrative reports of other districts. F.B. Peacock, the commissioner of the Presidency Division in a letter to the Secretary of the General Department of Bengal Government writes, 'The improvement in the condition of the Chandals who were the chief agriculturists in Narail subdivision, has led them, it is said, to aspire to a superior status in the Hindu caste system. They now call themselves Namasudras and profess to be Vaisnavs.' [29]

Actually the Namasudra lived mainly in the marshy tracts of eastern Bengal earlier known by a common denigrating generic term of Chandala, a unified caste identity was not a given thing for them, as they were divided into a number of endogamous sub-caste, with low but differentiated social status and restriction on social interaction classified under a common caste name by the colonial ethnographers. These various sub-castes of fishing and boating people of eastern Bengal gradually started to unify themselves, as they underwent a profound physical transformation during the nineteenth century.

One related issue in Bengalis that the Chandal converted to Islam during the medieval period discussed in previous pages. The Colonial ethnographer popularized a social emancipation theory on the basis of Brahmanical social order. In Bengal, Muslim converts were drawn mainly from Rajbansis, Pod, Chandals, Koch and other indigenous groups that had been only lightly exposed to brahmanical culture and in Punjab the same was true of the various Jat clans that eventually formed the bulk of the Muslim community. [30] E.A. Gait observation that 'the Bengali high Muslim populations correlated with the simplest social organisation that is, with the least elaboration of castes. Nothing the affinities of the Muslims of the least with indigenous Pod and Chandal communities and those of the north with indigenous Rajbanshis and Kuch communities.' [31] Gait remarked that, 'the proportion of Hindus of other castes in these parts of the country is, and always has been, very small. The main castes are the Rajbanshis (including

Koches) in North Bengal and the Chandals and other caste of non-Aryan origin in East Bengal. [32]

## 6. Conclusion

In this way the other caste people considered Namasudra people as Chandal and they started to lose their power, fame, right, property, education etc. and in course of time they were considered as untouchable like other Sudra in Bengal. During the British period also Namasudra people were considered as Chandal or Charal; which the Namasudra people opposed and started agitation against so called higher caste people.

It is quite probable therefore that before nineteenth century there was no caste in Bengal called the 'Chandala' it was only the generic term used to refer to a wide variety of lower caste people. Later on, the colonial administration and its ethnographers lumped together several such low ranking occupational sub-caste and branded them as Chandala. A generic term was thus transformed into a caste name, which its recipients later tried to break out of by adopting a more respectable appellation, Namasudra. In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century's, when the Namasudra social movement actually began, a lot of their energies were directed towards the elimination of sectional differences and construction horizontal solidarity among the members of these various subcastes.

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