

**GENDER, CASTE AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES  
THE NAMASUDRAS IN CONTEMPORARY WEST BENGAL**

*A thesis submitted towards partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of*

**M Phil in Women's Studies**

Course affiliated to Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies,  
Law and Management  
Jadavpur University

*Submitted by*

**MOUMITA BISWAS**

**EXAMINATION ROLL NO.: MPWO194005**

*Under the guidance of*

**DR. NANDITA BANERJEE DHAWAN**

**Assistant Professor**

School of Women's Studies,  
Jadavpur University

School of Women's Studies

Jadavpur University

Kolkata-700032

India

2019

M Phil in Women's Studies  
Affiliated to the  
Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies, Law & Management  
Jadavpur University  
Kolkata, India

---

**CERTIFICATE OF RECOMMENDATION**

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Gender, Caste and Religious Identities: The Namasudras in Contemporary West Bengal**” is bonafide work carried out by **MOUMITA BISWAS** under our supervision and guidance for partial fulfillment of the requirement for M Phil in Women's Studies during the academic session 2019.

---

**THESIS ADVISOR**

**Dr. Nandita Banerjee Dhawan**  
School of Women's Studies  
Jadavpur University, Kolkata- 700032

---

**DIRECTOR**

**Professor Aishika Chakraborty**  
School of Women's Studies  
Jadavpur University, Kolkata- 700032

---

**DEAN**

**Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies, Law & Management**  
**School of Water Resources Engineering**  
**Jadavpur University, Kolkata- 700032**

## **CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL \*\***

This foregoing thesis is hereby approved as a credible study of a social science/humanities subject carried out and presented in a manner satisfactorily to warrant its acceptance as a pre-requisite to the degree for which it has been submitted. It is understood that by this approval the undersigned do not endorse or approve any statement made or opinion expressed or conclusion drawn therein but approve the thesis only for purpose for which it has been submitted.

**Committee**

---

**Final Examination  
for the evaluation  
of the thesis**

---

---

\*\* Only in case the thesis is approved.

## **Declaration of Originality and Compliance of Academic Ethics**

---

I hereby declare that this thesis contains literature survey and original research work by the undersigned candidate, as a part of my M Phil in Women's Studies degree during academic session 2019.

All information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct.

I also declare that, as required by this rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referred all material and results that are not original to this work.

Name: MOUMITA BISWAS

Roll Number: MPWO194005

Thesis Title: Gender, Caste and Religious Identities  
The Namasudras in Contemporary West  
Bengal

Signature:

Date:

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

---

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to some inspirational people without whom my understanding on this subject would not develop.

I would like to thank Professor Aishika Chakraborty for her encouragement and guidance in all occasions.

I am forever indebted to my supervisor Dr. Nandita Banerjee Dhawan for her support, excellent guidance and liberty of thought she has given me. I would not be able to finish the dissertation on time if she was not there to help me.

I am grateful to Dr. Hardik Brata Biswas whose support and guidance helped me in all occasions.

I would also thank School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University to grant me an opportunity to write on something near to my heart.

**Date : May, 2014**

**Place : Jadavpur University,  
Kolkata**

**MOUMITA BISWAS**

**(Roll No. – MPWO194005)**

# PREFACE

---

I was interested in this topic after reading Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's extensive work on Namasudra community. Being part of Namasudra community, having the identity of dalit woman I was drawn to think about condition of my community in contemporary times and analyze our religious identity at the intersection of caste and gender. In this work my supervisor Dr. Nandita Banerjee Dhawan always was beside me to guide, talk when I needed and let me think the way I wanted. I think the following lines will throw some light and briefly summarize this dissertation.

The organized protest of Namasudra community was ruptured after Partition when they had to migrate to India and dispersed across the continent. The rehabilitation policy of India has not proven helpful enough for them. To understand the condition of Namasudras in contemporary times, the study focused on a fixed geographical location delves into questions of rehabilitation policy for the migrants and how they perceive debates around citizenship in recent times. In India Namasudras were termed as 'Hindu' refugees, and this religious identity had several political connotations. The thesis focuses on ways in which gendered norms and caste identities play an important role in the formulation of religious and political identities of Namasudras in contemporary West Bengal.

# Table of Contents

	<b>Page No</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Displacement and Migration</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Construction of Religious Identities</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Construction of Political Identities</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Conclusion</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>86</b>

## Introduction

The Hindu social order is a ladder of castes placed one above the other together representing an ascending scale of hatred and a descending scale of contempt (Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches* 105).

In India historically marginalized people on the socio-economic, cultural, religious levels known sometimes as *Panchamas*, *Asprushya*, *Achhuts* or *Antyaja* were included by the colonial government under the title scheduled castes in 1936 (Telumbde 1). Ambedkar called them 'Dalits' in the marathi journal *Bahiskrut Bharat* for the first time in 1928 (Rege, *Writing Caste* 14). Brahminical texts define stratification of society in two terms, *varna* and *jati*. *Varna* is a Sanskrit word which means colour initially this concept segregated population into four categories. These were *brahmana* or the priestly class, *kshatriya* or the military class, *vaisya* or the merchant class, *sudra* or the menial class<sup>1</sup>. Later fifth *varna* was introduced which consisted of untouchables. In such a hierarchical society the *brahmana* and *kshatriya* dominated the society by monopolizing knowledge and enforcing martial power. *Jati* is another concept defining localized group of people who have similar occupation, food habit, social customs and dress code. Hence it helps to understand local, regional variation of these hierarchies. The concept of *varnasankara*<sup>2</sup> led one *varna* to become a *jati* because endogamy was enforced resulting in reproduction of caste, manufacturing of an occupational skill along the line of birth and distinctive cultural practices. Uma Chakravarti sees three major divisions existing in Indian society in contemporary times, one is brahmanas comprised of powerful sections, second one is comprised of middle castes, some of them could be Other Backward



Castes(OBC), and the third one is lower castes consists of those at the bottom of hierarchy, earlier considered to be untouchables (Chakravarti, ch.1, location 379, par. 4).

This value based system of Caste, considering some as higher and some as lower rooted in the standards found in *dhramashastras*<sup>3</sup>. The relationship of caste with work, ritual status, and cultural traditions functions within a broader framework; it is the space where the localized hierarchies play key role and maintains difference between upper caste and lower caste. Since certain works were considered as impure, people associated with those occupations were considered as polluting or lowly in terms of Caste. Upper castes assuming themselves as pure tried to segregate themselves from lower castes in all terms. Caste has a material basis because it keeps the disadvantaged away from the access of social power as well as material resources. The Caste is also a bounded or enclosed group where ritualized systems of marriage, eating and physical contact barred castes to mix with others. Caste and gender are intrinsically linked as caste is perpetuated by marriage and reproduction; in other words controlling women's sexuality is extremely important for the existence of caste system. Endogamy or marriage within one's social group ensures this structure. In the unique structure of Indian society brahminical patriarchy provides code and conducts for restricting women's sexuality which ascertains perpetuation of the caste system. The coercive application of these codes, prescribed by brahminical texts were meant for upper castes in particular, but sometimes become essential mandate for lower castes seeking upward mobility. Dalit women are subjected to various levels of patriarchal oppression. The graded structure of patriarchy positions dalit women at the bottom of hierarchy (Chakravarti, ch.2, location 849, par. 15).

Sharmila Rege suggests that for feminist study it is not enough to understand patriarchal oppression in dalit woman's lives resulting from multiple patriarchies. One has to analyze how caste based hierarchy is producing multiple patriarchies where inequality is perceived differently in each power dynamics (Rege, *Against the Madness* 20). Here one has to consider how the woman as a category is differently reconstituted in different patriarchal relations.

## **Review of Literature**

I am here trying to focus on Namasudra community and their religious practices at the intersection of caste and gender. There are certain articles, number of critical books which have helped me to formulate this understanding. The religio-political injunction in studying castes from feminist standpoint is important as caste system is primarily validated by religio-legal texts, and subjective experience unravels innate complexity of this structure. In terms of feminist scholarship such study can be identified with feminist debates of contemporary times, like Sabarimala temple<sup>4</sup> entry movement, or debate surrounding Haji Ali Dargah<sup>5</sup>. The Indian constitution is premised upon certain ethos to protect rights of the vulnerable groups like securing rights for women or adoption of policies to protect dalit and marginalized groups in terms of socio-economic-religious-political arenas of life, providing them with a sense of social justice. With the introduction of neo-liberalism, the state is in the process of withdrawing welfare policies, relegating the lower castes to a further disadvantaged situation. It encourages one to invest intellectually in the caste-gender system in Indian society, where an individual in different social locations has to negotiate with different power dynamics. Women's

movement to secure religious rights in contemporary times could be read as a dialogue with the patriarchal structures to negotiate their relation with religious institutions/communities, without hampering their relation with the said spaces. Such movement marks importance of these spaces in women's lives which sometimes provide them with security and sometimes perpetrate gender based violence. Also the contemporary time is experiencing religion as a political subject, appearing as overlapping aspects comprised of powerful and powerless, secular and religious which articulates political power (Mukerjee, *Creating* 3). Therefore, religion is no longer a secluded private affair of individual, but it must be understood in terms of political, socio-cultural and gender practices and ideologies (Nair 36).

In the process of creating complex structure of caste in India, marriage plays an important role. In other words caste system can very well be interpreted as a ritual, political and economic system reproduced through marriage. The caste purity is ascertained by possession of girl's womb in pre puberty times through *garbhadhan* ritual meant for upper castes<sup>6</sup>. An upper caste widow is relegated from social unit of family, either she is burnt in the funeral pyre<sup>7</sup> with her husband or she ceases to be a complete person without reproduction role. In the case of lower castes or intermediate castes widow remarriage was practiced, usually with the closest blood kin of the deceased husband. Upper castes did not permit lower castes to follow their marriage rituals. The lower castes are bound in a system where labouring class is always kept wider keeping the production structure beneficial for upper castes. In this way patriarchal control on women's sexuality is linked with material aspects of caste relations. Patriarchies in the subcontinent existed within a

larger system, and here hierarchy is formed according to the caste system. This graded system was conceptually formed along the line of brahminical patriarchy. Such a complex system aimed at controlling land, gender, demography and caste together where both the brahmins and lower/dalit castes exist within its ambit. In the case of inter caste union, lower caste women were forced to sexual servitude to upper caste men, but lower caste man's alleged relation with upper caste woman caused violence from strict societal order making both man and woman victims at the same time (Chakravarti, ch.5, location 1715, par. 6).

Despite existence of different kinds of marriage, endogamous one was perceived to be primary marriage. The union between lower caste woman and upper caste man was sometimes tolerated, but union between upper caste woman and lower caste man was formidable. Such structure ensures power of some men over other men and power of men over all women. The difference between dalit women and upper caste women lies in the fact that dalit women do not possess land or property. As the dalits scarcely own anything both men and women need to invest their labour. Upper caste women do not have any societal function outside reproduction, hence meant for sexual labour only. Dalit women and children are integrated into the structure of labour and have a distinctive work ethic. For ensuring purity of the upper castes, domestic management is crucial for upper caste women, but their household work is never recognized as productive work. On the other hand dalit woman's work is essential for their existence, but devalued by the caste system. In some occasions it is being argued that dalit women do not bear the burden of *pativrata*<sup>8</sup> ideology, an aspect linked to upper caste woman. A *pativrata* wife views her

husband as an honoured being and she cannot break the silence about oppression in the family due to the codes of respectability. Initially these codes were not enforced upon dalit women. With gradual *jatikarana*<sup>9</sup> upper caste norms were also located into dalit castes. Dalit women's experience of oppression generates from caste as well as patriarchy. In other words they are placed at the bottom of the hierarchical structure and experience oppression from the graded structure of patriarchy (Chakravarti, ch.5, location 1770, par. 12).

Among the varied population concentration across India, West Bengal is one of the four states which contains nearly half of the dalit population (Teltumbde 3). Namasudra Community is one of the numerically, socio-politically strongest communities amongst various dalit sub castes in West Bengal in contemporary times (Rana 46). Sekhar Bandyopadhyay informs that Namasudras, prior to partition, lived in east Bengal in districts named Bakarganj, Faridpur, Dacca, Mymensingh, Jessore and Khulna, in low lying marshy lands. They were called Chandals and known to be non Aryan indigenous people of the land, as described by nineteenth century ethnographers like James Wise or Herbert Risley. Certain sources indicate Namasudras were placed higher in the caste hierarchy than other lower castes in Bengal, such as Dom, Hadi, Bagdi who were denied access to Hindu society in early twentieth century. A few sources call them mixed caste or *antyaja* caste<sup>10</sup>.

In nineteenth century in East Bengal, the condition of Namasudras changed significantly because of the rapid reclamation of marshy lands, a small number of Namasudras were able to move up the social ladder taking professions like trade, money lending or possessing lands. Though there was long history of fight against harsh natural landscape,

they were able to create a self image radically different from people living at the periphery of society. In this juncture transition from Chandal to Namasudra took place. The first meeting to uplift social status was held in 1881 in the village called Dattadanga of Molarhat sub division of Khulna District. The collective consciousness of Namasudras was result of a number of libertine influences dating back to eighteenth and nineteenth centuries namely Islam, Christianity and later *bhakti* movement. In Bengal *bhakti* movement was initiated by Sri Chaitanya and his disciples with the aim of salvation of the downtrodden. Later *sada* or six Goswamis of Vrindavan tied Bengal Vaishnavism with orthodox Indian religion. In Bengal a syncretic sect called Gaudiya Vaishnava Sampradaya was formed by Chaitanya's followers drawing from earlier liberal trends, canonical orthodoxy of *smartapurana* and more radical *sahajiya* tradition enjoyed enormously by the lower section of society; growing ever increasingly as an institution Gaudiya Vaishnavism had restricted lower caste people's access and provided ritualistic privileges to brahmins. To protect himself from Brahminic Hinduism, Chaitanya left the caste question open for which there was no consistent model to follow in terms of caste problem (Bandyopadhyay 389). Anand Teltumbde suggests that anti caste movement which is characterized by resistance to brahmanism, initially grew out of Shramana traditions, namely Buddhism and Jainism failing to do away with caste system effectively. Proper introduction with Islamic traditions from 12<sup>th</sup> century, mystics or Sufis attracted sudras and dalits, but gradually Muslim rulers also felt the utility of hierarchical structure of previous Hindu social order. The radical potential of Islam was replaced with Indian caste system, giving religious legitimacy to caste invoking the concepts of *kafa'a*<sup>11</sup>. Simultaneously *bhakti* movement also emerged as another strand of anti caste

movement having certain qualities of 'semitic' religions like Islam and Christianity where monotheistic outlook, emotional investment, adoration of the teacher could be seen (Teltumbde 35). Uma Chakravati suggests that bhakti movement was an extremely important space for lower castes and women to assert themselves, being an anti caste movement it incorporated the lowly stigmatized people of the society (Chakravati, ch.6, location 1949, par.5).

First self assertion of Namasudras came into being in 1872 when a wealthy Namasudra person invited upper caste people to his father's *sradh* ceremony for mixed caste commensality, but was refused by Kayasthas; this sparked agitation and social boycott from Namasudras part who resolved not to work under upper caste people. A Vaishnavite peasant named Harichand of Faridpur expressing himself as incarnation of god settled in a place named Orakandi and organized his own sect on basis of non ritualistic bhakti, known to be Matua. The sect was further organized by Harichand's son Guruchand who prescribed the ideal path was to combine bhakti karma summarized in a dictum – "*hate kam, mukhe nam*". Namasudra people initially tried to subvert the hierarchy later absorbed the caste ideology of pervasive orthodoxy and claimed Brahmin origin from the sage Kashyap. In subsequent myth Harichand appeared a brahmin by caste losing his status by marrying a Namasudra person. Such events describe how upward mobility is associated with absorbing oppressive ideologies prescribed by brahminical patriarchy where brahmins assumed highest position and lower caste women's association regarded as polluting. In late Nineteenth century a report from Decca shows that Namasudras venerated all the Hindu gods and goddesses though could not participate in a few because of cost involved; their deities were Manasa, Lakshmi Karthik. Durga puja was celebrated

with great enthusiasm, along with worshipping orthodox Hindu deities like Kali, Lakshmi, Manasa and Bastu (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 384-406).

Teltumbde feels the spiritual liberation was not sufficient for dalits' socio-economic liberation. Bhakti movement failed to alter division of labour being unable to alter the structure vertically (Teltumbde 36). In case of Matuas it was initially radical enough to influence dalits to improve their socio-economic position, unlike bhakti. The British rule effectively influenced caste system in India because of its institutional framework of governance and ideological investments in the areas of human rights. Dalits were immensely impacted by the missionaries as their only source of education, a mean to become one with the changing world (Teltumbde 128). Namasudras received opportunities of education as missionaries like C.S. Mead collaborated with Guruchand and opened a mission school in Orakandi on a plot donated by Guruchand. Immediately after this episode Guruchand's associates were appointed in British Government's services followed by 1907's first Namasudra delegation which was translated as an act of recognition from powerful, an aspect absent in pre British era. During Nationalist era Guruchand and Namasudras were disinterested in non co operation movement, instead they wanted share of political power demanding special privileges for depressed minority. Guruchand remained in close contact with Nawab of Decca Nawab Salimullah "to co-ordinate a joint resistance to the anti partition agitation" (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion*, 410). Besides it they were growing politically powerful group who condemned the Poona Pact, sometimes influential leaders like Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, grandson of Guruchand won as independent candidate, also played key role to reduce congress to a minority party in Bengal legislative assembly. The Matua Mahasangha emerged as



religious symbol of Matua community with the initiative of Tarak Gosainin 1915 at Orakandi, followed by an ashram for Namasudra students (Bandyopadhyay 413).

Such gradual advancement of the community was severely ruptured because of partition. Though majority of Namasudra people wanted to stay in East Pakistan instead of migrating to India, they were forced to India followed by violence and adoption of East Pakistan's Islamic constitution. In India their identity being communist or schedule caste was lost in the politically charged term 'Hindu' resulting in violent riot in Calcutta and Howrah. Unlike western India where dalit perceived Partition and riot as a matter between upper caste hindus and muslims, Eastern India faced different consequences and the schedule castes, tribes of this region suffered mostly. In India they were provided terrible rehabilitation policies and in large numbers had to shift in inhospitable lands of Dandya Karanya or Andaman (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 252-255). Upon not being able to secure hospitable land in Dandya Karanya, about 30,000 refugees were mobilized by Udbastu Unnyanshil Samiti under leadership of Satish Mandal and arrived at Marichjhapi, 125 square km uninhabited land of Sundarban; they built within months settlements with basic amenities. In the name of safeguarding precarious economy of West Bengal along with furthering tiger protection project Namasudra settlement in Marichjhapi was regarded as criminal offence. The CPI(M) Government tried to forcefully evacuate them, upon rejecting fired and killed 26 people, subjected economic blockade, as a result 4128 families perished. Post partition, refugee Namasudra peasants were drawn close to communist leadership though incidents like Marichjhapi massacre proved they received nothing in return (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest*, 262).

Namasudras who were able to remain in West Bengal chose the path of education as it was suggested by Guruchand. The power base of Matua community held by P. R. Thakur supported government's rehabilitation policy initially. Thakur also became Minister of State and Tribal Development, but in 1964 had to resign from the assembly on the ground of Congress governments attack on the refugees in Bangaon. Disillusioned by the unsympathetic rehabilitation policy of the government P. R. Thakur felt the need for uniting the community, now dispersed across region. He decided to revive Matua Mahasangha (henceforth MM) in 1986 which started disseminating religious messages similar to the acts of *gosains* and *pagols* on nineteenth century. MM professed its goal to be able to bring religion based modernity by fighting against social vices like casteism, superstitions and economic backwardness. MM at presently is a centralized organization with a spiritual head, organizational head and central executive committee. It initially prohibited members from participating in politics; members do not mention themselves as dalits or refer to Ambedkar on any occasion. This sangha does not confront mainstream hinduism, but opposes brahminical rituals, domination and devotes to education, social welfare. In 2003 National democratic Alliance amended citizenship Act by denying right of citizenship to those arriving after 25<sup>th</sup> March 1971 which adversely affected Namasudra community and MM organized protests to repeal the act without any result so far (Bandyopadhyay, 269-272).

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in his essay "Partition and Ruptures of Dalit identity Politics in Bengal" suggested for understanding post partition history of caste in West Bengal investigation of local dynamics is required (464). This dissertation is based on qualitative interview based study done in the village named Khidirpur Colony, Kuradah Ghat in the

Haripara Block of Murshidabad district in West Bengal. The number of respondents in the study is 35 men and women across two to three generations. To provide an analysis at the intersection of caste, religion and gender respondents from different religious sects like Anukul Thakur, Bhaba Pagla, Gaudiya Vaishnavite and Matua were interviewed.

My understanding of Namasudra community in contemporary times and construction of their religious identity from gendered perspective has been formulated by some critical writings. The caste is an essential aspect in India producing graded structure of patriarchies with which dalit women negotiate. To understand the relation of caste and gender producing this complex structure I have focused on Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar's writings. In the lecture named *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* delivered in Anthropology seminar of Columbia University on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1916 Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar mentioned "Caste in India means an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another" through the custom of endogamy. He says "A Caste is an Enclosed Class" (Ambedkar, 19). All the customs of preserving the caste can be found in brahmin caste with utmost strictness, the highest caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy. The other castes tried to imitate them. In this way the brahmins while making themselves a caste has created several other castes.

Uma Chakravarti in her book *Gendering Caste: Though a Feminist Lens* theorizes how Indian society imbibed graded patriarchy or more than single patriarchal structures. She described how in the ritualized brahmin marriage a virgin girl is gifted to the caste brother by the father with proper accompaniments; here the father's consent is enough

which might not be the case in the lower castes. Chakravarti explains the difference between patriarchal oppression faced by upper caste woman and dalit women. The brahminical patriarchy which subjugates upper caste women with codes of respectability and *pativrata* ideology demarcated upper caste women from dalit women. But dalit women face oppression for their caste identity as well as gender identity. Their productive labour is never acknowledged for the caste ideology; for the percolation of brahminical customs to lower castes dalit women are subjugated by codes of brahminical ideology as well. Chakravarti's analysis helps to understand how in India caste is linked with patriarchy where dalit women have to negotiate with a graded power structure (Chakravarti, ch.5, location 1719, par. 5).

The subjective experience of dalit woman is essential for feminists as it provides perception of people placed at the bottom of graded patriarchy. Sharmila Rege in the book *Against the Madness of Manu* analyzes how caste is entangled with gender. According to her understanding patriarchal oppression in dalit woman's lives resulting from multiple patriarchies or graded patriarchy is not enough. One has to consider how the woman as a category is differently reconstituted in different patriarchal relations and caste inequalities (Rege 20). She emphasizes how dalit women are doubly marginalized because of their caste identity and their gender identity.

This dissertation tries to present the condition of Namasudra community in contemporary times. To understand historical development of this community and relate it to

contemporary times Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's books, articles and essays helped me immensely. In his essay "Popular Religion and Social Mobility in Colonial Bengal" Bandyopadhyay informs how the community formed an assertion against the dominance of hinduism in pre partition east Bengal, here a quasi religious sect Matua organized the community and helped them to become upwardly mobile. He describes how the religious and social movement of Namasudras improved their condition and before partition they became politically powerful group to influence political scenario of Bengal.

A major shift took place after partition as Namasudras had to migrate from East Pakistan to India. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in the "Postscripts" of his book *Caste Protest Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947* refers that Namasudra movement was ruptured because of partition as the community was physically displaced, but majority of Namasudra people wanted to stay in East Pakistan instead of migrating to India. Namasudras had to leave East Pakistan because of violence and communal riots; after entering India they were termed as hindu refugees and had fewer chances of rehabilitation in West Bengal. Namasudra refugees in large numbers were sent to different locations, like Dandyakaranya and Andaman, in some places like Marichjhapi Namasudras refugees were murdered (Bandyopadhyay 262). Those who were able to remain in West Bengal followed the path of education and gradually Namasudras were improving their socio economic condition in West Bengal. MM as a religious institution tried to engage into social welfare, fought casteism, also protested against the Citizenship Amendment Act (2003) (Bandyopadhyay 270).

Namasudra poet, author and activist Kalyani Thakur Charal's book *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* is testimony of her strive towards becoming educated and established. Her nuanced

outlook towards society and distinctive analysis of patriarchal oppression in different spheres of life uttered through hard hitting lines helps one to understand subjective experience of a Namasudra woman and poet. Her narrative iterates how dalits in West Bengal were economically, socially marginalized; along with it the autobiography informs readers about her ideology, activism, desires, wishes and pains. She and her family were Matua devotees and they are closely associated with Thakurbari (Charal 120).

Debi Chatterjee, in her essay, “Udbastu Manush, Antorjatik Ain o Bharatbarsha” suggests that in India refugee crisis as a socio political issue emerged from the time of partition. In West Bengal refugee crisis was different from western India, as large numbers of refugees were dalit Namasudras here. Prior to 1950s these people were optimistic in continuing their lives in east Bengal. Chatterjee documents how the Indian government adopted a policy mentioning support for a small time, but rehabilitation was not promised at least in West Bengal. Later the poor condition of refugee camps, harsh reality of poverty, untimely death of large scale of people, human rights violation in Dandakaryanya or Marichjhapi makes one question prominent whether the reason is state’s inability to provide rehabilitation for their late arrival, or it hints towards casteist tendency of the government in general (Chatterjee 80-84).

Anand Teltumbde in his book *Dalits: Past, Present, Future* informs that in 1981 Backward (SC, ST, OBC) and Minority Communities Employee Federation (BAMCEF) was formed by Kanshi Ram, who later stepped in to political arena with Bahujan Samaj party (BSP) and succeeded well in electoral politics. However the success of caste based politics or bahujan politics was short lived. He describes how the neo liberal policies

adopted by the state from 90s have not proven to be beneficial for the dalits in India (Teltumbde 133).

Santosh Rana and Kumar Rana in the book *Paschimbange Dalit of Adivasi* inform the current situation of Namasudras in India. This work informs that according to census of 2011, the current population of Namasudras in India is 45,07,989. Among them, the largest section comprised of 6,31,000 people who are currently staying in West Bengal. Also amongst dalit communities, the population of Namasudras is 35,04,642 which is the second largest and is 16.3% of the total dalit population in West Bengal. One can see a gradual increase of Namasudra population in West Bengal which can be caused by continuous migration from Bangladesh the author suggests. Namasudras are more advanced in terms of education, settlement, job than other dalits in West Bengal. Their literacy rate is higher than average literacy rate of West Bengal according to 2011 census (Rana 46).

## **Research Objectives:**

Deriving from Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's several historical and critical works I have formulated an understanding of Namasudra peoples' history and development. He has emphasized the need to understand post partition history in terms of caste sustained investigation of the specific local dynamics of a particular area. One objective of this research is to provide an analysis of specific local dynamics and to see whether Namasudras were able to rehabilitate after being displaced from Bangladesh. It becomes important here to observe how citizenship debate is influencing them in recent times.

Bandyopadhyay mentions how Namasudras were identified as hindu refugees after they have migrated to India, an identity which is religious as well as political. This dissertation focuses on the ways in which Namasudras' religious identity is constructed looking at responses of devotees from different religious sects. Here it becomes essential to study ways in which gendered norms, ideologies and practices become an integral part of the experiences of Namasudra peoples' family and religious lives.

Bandyopadhyay mentions that after partition the protest against caste discrimination initiated by Namasudras in east Bengal was lost. The objective here is to analyze ways in which caste and gender are mutually constitutive in the formation of political identities, experiences and practices of Namasudras in contemporary times.



## **Research Questions:**

The study therefore focuses on the following research questions:

1. How have the Namasudras coped with the experience of displacement after migrating from Bangladesh? How has the identity of Namasudras been constructed as hindu refugees in contemporary times?
2. How have the religious identities of Namasudras been constructed in different religious sects in the larger context of their interactional dynamics with brahminical hinduism? How do gender ideologies and practices play a role in their everyday religiosities?
3. How do the categories of caste and gender interplay in the construction of political identities of Namasudras in contemporary times?

## **Research Methodology:**

I use feminist methodology in my thesis to fulfill my research objectives. Given the broad range of objectives of my research and the interdisciplinary nature of the enquiry, I have conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with my participants. The free flowing nature of interviews has to go beyond the structured nature of question and answer. As a feminist researcher, I have followed the model of interviewing for achieving non-hierarchical relationship with the participant in the research. My investment in the research as a member of the Namasudra community helped me to understand the social location of my respondents. My 'belonging' to the community helped me gain the trust and confidentiality of the participants. This helped them to interact more freely and share their gendered and intimate experiences.

The subjectivity as a lens much wider than narrow identity helps to formulate critical understanding of the subject by not getting trapped only in identity politics, but to acknowledge the identity as a position to begin with and look into the research question from various other perspectives. The respondents I am working with are not limited to their caste identities, but it is one of the several other identities formulating a complex and ever changing subjectivity to which I tried to associate from my standpoint. Interviews conducted from same critical standpoint can relate interviewer and respondent; in this process acknowledging social location of self and the respondent is essential to formulate an analysis which will be considering hierarchies of gender, class, caste, ethnicity and community.

The respondents chosen for this qualitative interview based study are devotees of different sects. The researcher had taken help from some respondents to identify families who fall under this criteria and purposively taken interviews of those people. Instead of having a structured set of questions, I chose to follow an informal and unstructured in-depth interview and had a list of relevant topics and themes prepared for the interviews. This helped and supplemented with unscheduled probes that arise from the discussions. Probing questions were helpful to seek elaboration on answers already received in response to questions. While it is important to not antagonize the participants, it was also essential to set up a flowing conversation so that responses could be rich and detailed. It was important to share some of my experiences and stories to ensure that the participant does not feel objectified and also does not become weary of the conversation.

In this dissertation 35 people across three generations were interviewed in Khidirpur Colony, Kumradah Ghat in Hariharpara block of Murshidabad district, West Bengal. These families are followers of Anukul Thakur, Bhaba Pagla, Gaudiya Vaishnavites and Matua. Also I have interviewed author, poet dalit activist Kalyani Thakur Charal. I have interviewed former professor of Berhampore Krishnath College Jagabandhu Biswas who has worked relentlessly for dalit people and engaged to bahujan politics for a long time. I have interviewed former lecturer of Murshidabad institute of Technology Prafulla Sarkar for his knowledge and engagement to bahujan politics.

## **Chapters:**

This dissertation is divided into following chapters-

Chapter 1: In this chapter the dissertation is introduced and contextualized. Also research objectives, research questions and research methodologies are discussed here.

Chapter 2: This chapter deals with the ways in which Namasudras have coped with displacement after migrating from Bangladesh in contemporary times.

Chapter 3: This chapter deals with construction of religious identities of Namasudras in contemporary times looking at different religious sects they follow.

Chapter 4: The focus of the chapter is to analyze how political identities of Namasudras are constructed in contemporary times.

Chapter 5: Looking at the findings this chapter tries to provide a conclusion of the study.

Notes:

1. Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar said in India society is composed of classes and the earliest known are the (1) Brahmins or the priestly class; (2) the Kshatriya, or the military class; (3) the Vaishya, or the merchant class and (4) the Shudra, or the artisan and menial class” (Ambedkar, *Caste Genesis* 24)

2. Uma Chakravarti said “Varnasamkara, or the theory of mixed unions, functions on the principle of the hierarchical arrangements of a few ‘base categories’ that generates new categories through the violation of the preferred endogamous marriage” (Chakravarti, ch.3, location 1198, par. 19).

3. Uma Chakravarti suggests dharmasastras were region legal text defining each law for hindu society (Chakravarti. Ch. 1, location 394, par. 1.)

4. 4. TOI-Online. “What is Sabarimala case?”. *Times of India*. 3Oct. 2018. Web. 23 April.2019.

5. Qudsiya Contractor said “Two recent mobilisations of women in Mumbai expose the tension between Muslim patriarchies and women’s rights in contemporary Islam. The first case refers to a petition in the Bombay High Court filed by the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan that challenged the prohibition of women in the inner sanctum of the Haji Ali Dargah. In 2016, the Supreme Court ruled against the governing trust of Haji Ali Dargah and restored women’s right to enter the inner sanctum”. (Contractor, *Muslim Women* .1)

6. Uma Chakravarti said “The tight control of the sexuality of women of the upper castes is an aspect of the larger ‘rationale’ of pure and impure. The pre-pubertal marriage of upper caste girls so that the unpolluted womb of the wife was sexual property of the husband before she began to menstruate, immediately after which the *garbadhanam* or consummation ceremony would be completed, were necessary elements in the notion of caste purity” (Chakravarti, ch. 5, location 1659, par.1).

7. Uma Chakravarti said “The problem of the widow in the brahminical structure of patriarchy was that since the wife had no social existence outside her husband” (Chakravarti, ch. 5, location 1676, par. 2).

8. Uma Chakravarti said “In the case of upper caste Hindu society, the design of patriarchal class- caste structure was mapped out by brahmanas. Pativrata, the specific dharma of the Hindu wife, then became the ideology which women accepted, and even aspired to, chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest expression of their selfhood” (Chakravarti, ch. 4. location 1548, par. 13).

9. Uma Chakravarti said “ Whatever might have been the differences between dalit women’s experience of patriarchy and that of upper caste women, the process of Sanskritization or jaticarana- intensified castification- led to upper caste norms and upper caste patriarchal practices percolating in the lower caste ranks too” (Chakravarti, ch. 5. location 1770, par. 11).

10. The author of *Bangiya Jatimala* informs that Chandals were placed higher in the caste hierarchy than other lower castes in Bengal, such as Dom, Hadi, Bagdi who were denied access to Hindu society in early twentieth century. According to Manusmriti and Vyasamhita Chandals were untouchables, whereas Brahmapurana and Brihadharmapurana do not give firm indication of Chandals being untouchables or not, instead calls them antyaja or mixed caste (sankarajati). (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 385).

11. Teltumbde says kafa’a as a concept giving “legitimacy to castes” in Islam (Teltumbde 35).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Displacement and Migration**

The chapter looks at ways in which Namasudra community has coped with the experience of displacement after migrating from east Bengal, now Bangladesh, to India in contemporary times. The chapter focuses on the land conflict, its effect on the Namasudras and ways in which Namasudras identity was constructed as Hindu refugees. This becomes important to understand the complexity around the Citizenship Amendment Act (2003) which denies citizenship to those coming to India after 25 March, 1971. The chapter is divided into two different sections, i) Land and Rehabilitation and ii) Construction of Hindu National Subject. The first section tries to analyze how the idea of land is operated on several levels for the peasant community of Namasudras. We study how the Namasudra community deals with complex negotiations on land with state and other stakeholders, thereby helping us in analyzing why Namasudras have settled in this location and what are their experiences regarding rehabilitation in India. The second section of this chapter deals with the ways in which Namasudra refugees were termed Hindus after coming to India prioritizing their religious identity over their caste identity. This was despite the fact that the religious identity of Hindus cannot be distinct from their caste identities as caste system forms the premise of Hinduism. This section also focuses on how Namasudras perceive the Citizenship Amendment Act (2003). It becomes important to understand how the Hindu identity is

implied in the lives of Namasudras to comprehend their socio-political condition in contemporary West Bengal.

## **Land and Rehabilitation**

The rapid reclamation of the marshy lands in east Bengal helped Namasudras to become peasant community in late nineteenth century<sup>1</sup>. The first phase of self-assertion of Namasudras happened in 1872 when a wealthy Namasudra person's invitation of mixed caste commensality was denied by the upper castes resulting in social boycott on the part of Namasudras<sup>2</sup>. A Vaishnavite peasant named Harichand of Faridpur organized a religious sect on the basis of non-ritualistic bhakti, known to be Matua. The sect was further organized by Harichand's son Guruchand who emphasized on work ethics and education as important means to improve one's social condition. Guruchand established a missionary school with help of C. S. Mead in Orakandi and got involved in politics for the welfare of Namasudra community<sup>3</sup>. The Matua Mahasangha emerged as a religious symbol of Matua community with the initiative of Tarak Gosain in 1915 at Orakandi, followed by an ashram for Namasudra students (Bandyopadhyay 412). By 1930 Namasudras had become a political power base in the institutionalized electoral politics of Bengal (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 414).

Such gradual development of the community was severely ruptured because of partition. The majority of Namasudra people wanted to stay in East Pakistan instead of migrating to India. Foremost Namasudra politician Jogendranath Mandal joined Liaquat Ali ministry in East Pakistan and remained in his position till 1950's. Namasudras were forced to leave East Pakistan because Pakistan "moved towards greater Islamisation of the polity"

and grew intolerant to the 'other' non-Muslim people (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 251). Unlike the high caste *bhadralok* refugees "who were rehabilitated in 'squatter colonies' in and around Calcutta" Namasudras found less opportunities to rehabilitate. The upper Castes left East Pakistan and migrated after partition in 1947 and entered India as the first wave of refugees (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 273). The second wave of refugee influx resulted from an event of 1949 when Namasudra peasants of the village Kalshira and 22 neighboring villages in Khulna were murdered, creating enough fear for Namasudras to leave East Pakistan (Bandyopadhyay 251). From 1950 onwards, refugees had to fight for citizenship and rehabilitation in West Bengal. In 1956, the policy of rehabilitating refugees outside Bengal was announced. Namasudra politician Jogendranath Mandal suggested that reclamation of fallow lands of Bengal can solve rehabilitation crisis and unemployment in Bengal, but in large numbers refugees were sent to inhospitable lands of Dandyakaranya and Andaman<sup>4</sup> (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 252-255). Namasudras who were able to remain in West Bengal chose the path of education as it was suggested by Guruchand. The power base of Matua community held by Pramatha Ranjan Thakur initially supported government's rehabilitation policy. Thakur also became Minister of State and Tribal Development, but in 1964 he resigned from the assembly on the ground of Congress government's attack on the refugees in Bangaon. Disillusioned by the unsympathetic rehabilitation policy of the government P. R. Thakur felt the need for uniting the community, now dispersed across region. He decided to revive Matua Mahasangha in 1986 to organize the community (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 265).



To understand whether the problem regarding land and rehabilitation has been solved for Namasudras village in Murshidabad district is selected for qualitative interview based study-Khidirpur Colony, Kumradah Ghat is located in Hariharpara block of Murshidabad district in West Bengal. One of the residents Binoy informs, “there was a refugee transit camp in this village”. Those Namasudra refugees living in this transit camp were not given rehabilitation in this location, but they had to shift to Andaman, Dandyakaranya and nearby refugee settlement area in Kulberia (Personal Interview. 8 Feb 2019). His statements reveal that the current settlement in Khidirpur Colony was not planned by the government. It may be said that the refugees who were not able to find proper rehabilitation are currently living in this village. Binoy also informed that the entire land was once the property of Kamala Ranjan Roy who was an upper caste landlord. The land was later absorbed by government as *khas* land (Personal Interview. 8 Feb 2019). Binoy’s statement may indicate the *khas* land where the village is now located is the land owned by government. This land was taken by the government in the time of land reform after independence in 1947. The issue of land is also related to communal conflicts for Namasudras. One of the respondents Anima also shared how their land in East Bengal was taken away by Muslims. Residents of Khidirpur Colony share a bitter relationship with neighbouring Muslim inhabitants. It may be true that their displacement from East Pakistan due to communal violence has conditioned them to hate Muslims. Kalyani Thakur Charal explained how land related feud was termed as communal violence in earlier days resulting in growing hatred in the name of religion (Personal Interview. 16 Feb 2019). A few respondents in the study exhibit extension of this historically imbued hatred compiled with memory of violence aiming at displacing Hindus from the then

Pakistan. Anima reflects the pain of forceful displacement when she says “we have come from one country to another in fear of Muslims, here also we see groups of Muslims” (Personal Interview. 26 Feb 2019). There is also a flip side of this narrative as Shankar shares his experience of how Muslims helped and permitted their stay in India on a land which legally belonged to them. These experiences prove that religious identities cannot be essentialised with violent behavior (Personal Interview. 20 Feb 2019). To see the ways in which Namasudras settled in this place and their condition in Khidirpur Colony a few interviews will be analyzed.

65 years old Nirmal, a Matua devotee is former teacher of a primary school, has a proper citizenship card. He remembers his experience of fleeing from Bangladesh where their economic condition could be comparable to ‘*zamindars*’ (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). His wife, Nilima, too recalled their house in Satparh and how “everything was good there, ponds and all, everything was good” (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Their son Piyush remembers how hundreds of people would have their meals in their house in Bangladesh. He had heard from his mother and aunts about their property and how many individuals in their neighbourhood “used to eat and study from our home in Bangladesh”. He remembered how the social structure was different in Bangladesh where Namasudras had a different society confined to their own community, while upper castes lived their own lives in their own society. There was no contradiction or contact between the two social groups. He repented how they were unable to do well; they were unable to meet 25 percent of their standards in Bangladesh (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). The experience of this family suggests the rapid decline in economic and social conditions for

many Namasudras and how their loss of land or displacement led to loss of their livelihood, respectability and significance.

Sagar, aged 65 a former Hindu businessman, was born in India and had heard from his father about their forefathers living in East Bengal in village Raghunathpur located in Gopalgunj subdivision. At the time of partition his father had to leave everything (land, house and property) behind and come to India. He had faced difficulties in providing for his family with his income from a small business. They are now a middle class family having daughters and two sons. His elder son, his wife and Sagar's eldest daughter work in government schools, his younger son works in a private company and youngest daughter is a homemaker. He recalls their 'well to do' status in Bangladesh and how his father was caught in Kolkata during riot for three days. His father settled in Khidirpur Colony after moving to India but he repented for their inability to own any land or property here. (Personal Interview. 10 Feb 2019). His wife, 50years old Sumita, was born in Bangladesh and later came to India with her parents. Her natal home was in Kulberia, a refugee settlement area. She came to Khidirpur Colony after her marriage at least 30 years back and used to bind *bidi* to sustain the family in the past. She cannot remember much about Bangladesh as she was a little child then (Personal Interview. 20 Feb 2019). The struggle of 65 years old Binoy, former government employee, was to become educated. His father, a tailor in Bangladesh, earned a modest income. In 1967 Binoy came to India after completing SSC and took shelter in a relative's house. He had to survive by earning as a daily wage labourer while he was pursuing B.Sc in Berhampore Krishnath College. The reason behind his coming to India was different from those mentioned above. According to him, there was no possibility of finding a respectful job

after completing his education in East Bengal because he was a religious minority. In both the above cases, we find respondents struggling hard to earn a respectable livelihood at the face of all odds.

Debi Chatterjee mentions displacement can be caused by natural calamity and sometimes it is caused due to human conflict. An individual is termed refugee if she has to cross the international border as a result of being displaced for certain reason and enter into a different country (Chatterjee 81). She is termed a refugee if she has to forcefully migrate from her country of nationality, thereby becoming displaced. The cases discussed above indicate that Nirmal or Binoy were not physically displaced because of violence, but they had voluntarily migrated to India. Binoy, however, had migrated from East Pakistan for better opportunity. Nirmal also does not give indication of physical violence. Therefore one needs to understand if these migrations can be understood as voluntary or not. Kalyani Thakur Charal indicates that the reason behind continuous migration is not only violence, psychological and economic reasons should also be noted. If all the relatives migrate to India the sole one left will also follow them as evident in case of a 63 years old Rishi, a worker in small trades. Following his forefathers, he migrated with his family to India. While initially they did not get rights of proper citizens, in the last few years they were able to vote (Personal Interview. 9 Feb 2019). Kalyani Thakur Charal shared how in a village in Bangladesh, a person who was a Namasudra told her that he was the lone Namasudra in his village while rest were Muslims. He expressed his desire to cross the borderland following his relatives (Personal Interview. 16 Feb 2019). These aspects emphasize that while migration may be voluntary, there are emotional and psychological issues involved in taking the decision to migrate. Chatterjee says that the reasons for

refugees' crossing international border can be varied, from economical, emotional, psychological to socio-political (Chatterjee 84). In the case of Namasudras, migration cannot be said to be entirely voluntary, because there were psychological and socio economic reasons involved. To understand reasons behind Namasudras' displacement or forceful migration a few more interviews will be analyzed.

Anima is a 55 years old homemaker who came to India with her husband after marriage, her father used to be a primary school teacher in Gopalganj, Betgramin Bangladesh. They could not bring a single penny from their home on their way to their first destination in India, Ranchi to pursue some trade. Later when she was pregnant she persuaded her husband to come to Bengal as she did not like Ranchi. They came to know about Khidirpur Colony from her cousin who was staying in the transit camp of Khidirpur Colony during that time. Anima described how she requested her cousin to let her stay with her. She said to her cousin, "You need not to give me anything, only let me be in front of your eyes" (Personal Interview. 26 Feb 2019). Her narrative exemplifies the psychological plight of a refugee woman in a physically vulnerable condition who felt scared in an unknown environment. She found the support of family members much more valuable to her. As a result this family settled in Khidirpur and bought a small shop in the *ghat* area. Her husband Nabarun testifies how he fought the intention of some people in the local club in Durga Mandir to send him back to Bangladesh. According to him, no facility or *patta* was given to them as he had arrived late (Personal Interview. 20 Feb 2019). This family is an example of how certain Namasudras faced difficulty in claiming land because of their late arrival in a village inhabited by Namasudras having similar

history. It suggests fractured condition of the community in the face of several complexities.

On a few occasions violence against women has been described as a reason for migration. Rishi remembers how in that turbulent period, Muslims in Pakistan forcefully married a few Hindu women. His dismay regarding inter-religious marriage not only indicates fear of the past but also patriarchal consideration of land and women being possessions of male headed community. He is in favour of preventing all sorts of socialization with Muslims. He says, “if they talk to me and I have a beautiful daughter or wife in my home their eyes will be fixed on them” (Personal Interview. 9 Feb 2019). This stereotypical description of Muslims has been used tirelessly by Hindu nationalists to spread communal tensions. However, Rishi also described how he was disgusted with women ‘greedy’ of fortune who got involved in ‘affair’ with Muslims. He clearly translates inter-religious love relationships into incidents of Muslim men luring Hindu women and forcefully marrying them, thereby rendering invisible women’s personal choice in marriage. The liaison between Muslim man and Namasudra woman is still aligned with past incidents of Muslim men marrying Hindu women forcefully in Pakistan. Kalyani Thakur Charal recalls how violence against women was intense and horrible, irrespective of whether they were Hindus or Muslims. Jayita, a 45 year old homemaker, shared her childhood memory of living in a border region of Malda district after her family shifted to India. She spoke of a Muslim adolescent girl who came running from the other side, the then East Pakistan uttering- “Allah, I am being killed” (Personal Interview. 8 Feb 2019). The wartime violence was indeed arbitrary to women, irrespective of religious

background where 'Pathan Sena' could kill a Muslim Bangladeshi girl working in the field.

Land related problems have not been solved entirely for Namasudras in West Bengal. Though there was a transit camp in this village no legal rehabilitation settlement was sanctioned. A portion of land in Khidirpur Colony belongs to local Muslim residents. In some cases the conflict prone relationship between Muslim neighbours and Namasudras results because of the claim of valid possession of the land. As some respondents feel gratitude towards Muslim people nearby for their support in the time of crisis one cannot essentialize communal problems affecting Namasudras till now. It has been examined why the Namasudra residents settled in this place despite legal complications. The reason for their migration here were psychological emotional and socio economical. It has been perceived that Namasudras did not migrate voluntarily, but forcefully displaced because of several reasons. The socio-economic condition of the respondents in most cases has deteriorated after settling in India as interviews suggested. But in a few cases they have been successful in improving their conditions. Namasudras are refugees in India because they were displaced from the country of nationality and crossed the border to settle in a new country, but the government did not show enough promise to rehabilitate them. Looking at the interviews it cannot be said in contemporary times Namasudras have rehabilitated in West Bengal or land related dispute has been resolved for them.

## **Construction of Hindu National Subject**

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has argued that in the process of othering the Muslims, Hindu nationalists had resorted to the process of appropriating the Scheduled castes in India

(Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 247). The gradual development of the community was severely ruptured because of partition<sup>5</sup>. Though majority of Namasudras wanted to stay in East Pakistan instead of migrating to India, they were forced to come to India because of the violence and adoption of East Pakistan's Islamic constitution in 1956<sup>6</sup> (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 252-255). After partition, the Namasudra community was physically displaced. They started migrating to West Bengal, and faced traumatic experiences unlike the wealthy upper castes. The high caste bhadralok refugees were "rehabilitated in 'squatter colonies' in and around Calcutta". Namasudras found fewer opportunities to rehabilitate in comparison to them. The upper castes left East Pakistan and migrated to India after the partition and entered India as the first wave of refugees (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 273). The Namasudra politician Jogendranath Mandal joined Liaquat Ali ministry in East Pakistan and remained in his position till 1950s. In the process of othering initiated by Pakistan, Namasudras were termed as Hindu rebels and in 1949 Namasudra peasants of Kalshira and 22 neighboring villages in Khulna were murdered, creating enough fear for Namasudras to leave East Pakistan. In India Namasudra refugees were termed as Hindus; their other identities were obliterated in this time, resulting in fierce Calcutta riot and Muslim inhabitants from West Bengal had to flee from those regions. As a reaction to it in east Pakistan violent riots spread in several districts like Khulna, Rajshahi, Dacca, Mymensingh and Barishal. The main victims of these riots were Namasudra and Santhals who were still living in East Pakistan. In 1950, 500 families, in 1951 1.5 million refugees, and in 1956 3.2 million refugees crossed the border of West Bengal. Unlike Western India where Dalits perceived Partition and riots as a matter between upper caste Hindus and Muslims, Eastern India faced different



consequences and it was the schedule castes and tribes of this region who suffered in most cases (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 251-252). Kalyani Thakur Charal opines this communal divide being caused by the state for political purposes. As neighbours Namasudras or Muslims did not have enmity among them. The divide was created as “Hindu vs Muslim, it was not solely Namasudras against Muslims” (Personal Interview. 16 Feb 2019). Therefore terming Namasudras as Hindu refugees only served the purpose to escalate the tension between Muslims and Hindus. To understand how Namasudras feel about the Hindu identity a few interviews can be analyzed.

Nabarun a shopkeeper in Khidirpur Colony told “Hindu religion is the *sanatana dharma*. Is there anything over Hindu? No.” For him there is no *jaat* as Namasudra, rather the jatis can be differentiated as Hindus and Muslims or men and women (Personal Interview. 20 Feb 2019). Rishi calls Hinduism *suskhama sanatana dharma*, the greatest religion of all times. Unlike Nabarun, he is aware about Namasudra’s previous identity as Chandals who were hated by caste Hindus; he is follower of Matua and considers it as part of Hindu religion. Another female devotee of Matua faith, 58 years old Nilima, refers in Matua religion there are people from scheduled caste, higher caste and Islam, but regarding her religious identity she says “Hindu it is, or what? We are Hindu.” She views Namasudras as advancing within the fold of Hinduism (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Therefore Matuas are not dissenting against brahminical Hinduism, but they prefer to become respectable within the fold of Hinduism. Suman aged 52 years believes himself to be Hindu, but he is aware that Namasudras are hated by other castes. He feels Namasudras who were able to advance in social and economic terms feel ashamed of Namasudra identity (Personal Interview. 11 Feb 2019). For Sitala, 50 years old *bidi*

worker, her Hindu identity is vital, but she believes unity among Namasudras is equally important (Personal Interview. 11 Feb 2019). Kakali on the other hand finds usage of *sindoor* as a married woman sole and most important marker of being Hindu (Personal Interview. 9 Feb 2019). Leena, a school teacher, is Jalia Kaibartya<sup>7</sup> by caste, she is married to vaishnavite Namasudra family and believes that she is Hindu. Regarding Namasudras' relation with larger Hinduism she feels brahmins are bestowed with the responsibilities of conducting religious rituals, a sudra cannot do that- it is an aspect one has to accept otherwise the society is not going to tolerate (Personal Interview. 9 Feb 2019). Her husband Pinaki is also school teacher and believes himself to be Hindu. He is aware about the fact that orthodox Hindu institutions will not accept Namasudras as Hindu (Personal Interview. 10 Feb 2019). Binoy considers himself Namasudra, Hindu, vaishnavite and says "we hate brahmin vaishnavas" (Personal Interview. 8 Feb 2019). Jayita, his wife also identifies herself as Hindu, but was not aware about Namasudras' social position earlier. Nowadays she has much exposure because of electronic media and has started thinking about these issues (Personal Interview. 8 Feb 2019). These are a few examples about Namasudras' keen interest of identifying themselves as Hindus though we see that in a number of cases respondents feel a discomfort identifying themselves equal to or 'respectable' as the caste Hindus. It is partially true as the study reveals that Namasudras after entering in India appeared as Hindu refugees, their identity of being lower caste or untouchables has disappeared in the politically charged term Hindu refugee.

In 2003 National Democratic Alliance (NDA) amended the Citizenship Act by denying right of citizenship to those arriving in India after 25<sup>th</sup> March 1971. This amendment

adversely affected the Namasudra community and Matua Mahasangha (MM) organized protests to repeal the act without any result though (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 270). As a result in 1999 elections, majority of the vote had gone to BJP and All India Trinamul Congress (TMC) Alliance (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 272). Mamata Banerjee and TMC were chosen over other parties by Matua voters as she had taken membership of Matua community, despite her Brahmin identity by birth. In 2010 though she was appointed the chief patron of MM, she carefully avoided MM's main demand of amendment of Citizenship Act. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay refers that members of Matua Mahasangha are suggested not to mention Ambedkar or ideas related to Ambedkar while describing Matua movement (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 272). Jagabandhu Biswas, a former professor of Krishnath College, who has worked relentlessly for dalits in Murshidabad said, "It is a pity that Matuas are not the followers of Ambedkar. The Matuas especially the 'Thakur Parivar' of Thakurnagar have split into two political parties, BJP and Trinamul, the two brahminical parties destroying the strength of Namasudras (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Kalyani Thakur Charal mentions how Namasudra refugees are constantly being marked as infiltrators, because by doing this state can avoid all responsibilities towards refugees inhabiting in India. Regarding Citizenship Amendment Act she said that Namasudra voters are supporting the political parties, but their only request to amend Citizenship Amendment Act has not been fulfilled so far. She feels the recent updating of National Register of Citizens containing names of Indian citizens in Assam has created many complications there. She cannot fully agree with such initiative by the state (Personal Interview. 16 Feb 2019). To see

how Namasudras in Khidirpur Colony perceive Citizenship Amendment Act a few Interviews will be analyzed.

Rishi, one of the respondents from Khidirpur Colony believes each one coming from Bangladesh will face difficult time if such law is implemented, even if they have come 70 years back and Matua community is conducting a relentless movement to grant them citizenship. He believes that the current political party in Central Government has taken up the issue seriously and people who have come till 2014 will be given Citizenship. Suman referred to the recent bill passed in Loksabha in 2019 as he has watched on television. He believes that the Muslims will be considered the sole infiltrator, because they did not have the religious reason, whereas Christians and Hindus will be given citizenship as they had to flee for religious reasons according to this bill. The bill has been passed in Loksabha in January 2019, but it has not been sent to Rajya Sabha so far<sup>8</sup>. Therefore this bill has not become an Act. These narratives are showcasing lack of understanding of the current situation which makes them vulnerable to political propaganda aimed at political benefit only. Kalyani Thakur Charal described how they had started a hunger strike in Thakurbari to protest against the Amendment in 2003. They had hoped that MPs of West Bengal would raise question against the Amendment which never happened as they remained silent during that time. She spoke about speculations and uncertainty about how the law is going to be implemented, and whether NRC is going to be implemented in West Bengal in the same way as in Assam. She feels the National Democratic Alliance in 2003 has done this amendment, now if the current political party BJP wants to change the law it cannot be done so easily, because to pass the bill support of both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha is needed. (Personal Interview. 16

Feb 2019). To understand if all the respondents feel like Rishi or Suman a few interviews can be analyzed.

Nirmal said he has a citizenship card. However, he shares how some may face problem. (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Nabin, a 45 years old employee in Berhampore Municipality, shows his concern for those trapped in this legal complication who may face severe consequences (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Like them Nibedita and Piyush feel the Act, if it comes through, is not going to affect Namasudras only, but all migrants. Pabitra on the other hand states everyone in this village will be secured as “the way this patta is given, from the place it is given it is being said that this is deed for the land” (Personal Interview. 26 Feb 2019). He has conviction about it being a valid document to prove citizenship, but Kalyani Thakur Charal describes this *patta* to be only a temporary system, not proving any guarantee of that sort. Also another respondent from Khidirpur Colony, Binoy questions validity of patta.

The Namasudra community is currently the scheduled caste community in India; historically marginalized people in Indian society were considered as *Panchamas, Asprushya, Achhuts or Antyajja*; those people were later included by colonial government under the title scheduled castes in 1936 (Teltumbde 1). Ambedkar called them ‘Dalits’ in the Marathi journal *Bahiskrut Bharat* for the first time in 1928 (Rege, *Writing Caste* 14). Namasudras are numerically second largest dalit community in West Bengal now (Rana 45-46). These interviews present a picture of contemporary situation of Namasudra community after migrating to India. The marginal people displaced from Bangladesh are trying to find proper settlement for a long time, but the interviews prove that the complication may not have ended for them. The interviews have indicated how

displacement is a phenomenon imbued with not only critical sides of political discourses, but also subjective pains implying layers of socio-political, economic, emotional and psychological suffering. The interview responses unravel potential dangers looming over this displaced community. Their condition proves the hollowness of political promises and casteist discourse of Indian state where dalits or marginal communities are manipulated for political gains. Though upper caste Hindus have also migrated from East Pakistan to Bangladesh, they did not experience problem of rehabilitation similar to that of the Namasudras. The land conflict, rehabilitation crisis, politicization of Namasudras as Hindu refugees and now the debate surrounding citizenship indicate complexity of the situation. The next chapters will throw some light on how the religious identity 'Hindu' cannot be possibly separated from its political connotation.

## Notes:

1. By the late nineteenth centuries a group of people with commonly shared experience of fighting harsh landscapes like marshy tracts or forests emerged with collective identity and created a self image radically different from the Chandal (Bandyopadhyay 387).
2. Namasudra community's first self assertion was formed in 1872 when a wealthy Namasudra person invited upper caste people to his father's *shradh* ceremony for mixed caste commensality, but refused by Kayasthas; this sparked agitation and social boycott from Namasudras part who resolved not to work under upper caste people (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 391).
3. In the election of 1937 Guruchand's associates and his grandson Pramatha Ranjan Thakur contested and won as independent candidate. Their decision to support Krishak Praja Party-Muslim League reduced Congress to a minority party in Bengal Legislative Assembly (Bandyopadhyay 411).
4. Upon not being able to secure hospitable land in Dandya Karanya at about 30,000 refugees mobilized by Udbastu Unnyanshil Samiti under leadership of Satish Mandal and arrived at Marichjhapi, but the settlement was termed illegal. CPI(M) government had taken coercive measures, subjected economic blockade, as a result 4128 families perished (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 262).
5. The organized Namasudra movement disappeared after 1947 as the pressure of partition politics, communal mobilization, violence and displacement forced them to align with the mainstream political parties like Congress and Hindu Mahasabha (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 273).
6. Foremost Namasudra politician Jogendranath Mandal joined Liaquat Ali ministry in East Pakistan and remained in his position till 1950's. The othering initiated by Pakistan termed Namasudras as Hindu rebels and in 1949 Namasudra peasants of Kalshira and 22 neighboring village in Khulna were murdered, creating enough fear for Namasudras to leave East Pakistan. In 1950 500 families, in 1951 1.5 million refugees and in 1956 3.2 million refugees crossed the border of West Bengal (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste protest* 251-252).
7. Jaliya Kaibartyas are 2.7% of total dalit population in West Bengal according to 2011 census (Rana 36)
8. PTI. "Citizenship amendment bill, triple talaq set to lapse on June 3". *The Economic Times*. 13 Feb. 2019. Web. 23 April. 2019.

## Chapter 3

### Construction of Religious Identities

This chapter focuses on the construction of religious identities of Namasudras in Khidirpur Colony by studying the religious practices of different sects and their interactional dynamics with brahminical Hinduism. Looking at religious lives of different sects this chapter provides an analysis of how gendered norms of religion and patriarchal norms of family play an integral part of maintaining religious identities. . The chapter is divided into two sections- i) Interactional Dynamics with Brahminical Hinduism ii) Different Sects and Religious Lives. The first section discusses how initially subversive Matua sect, forming as a reaction to brahminical Hinduism later conformed to the ideology of Hinduism and lost its subversive qualities. In this section interactional dynamics of Matua and brahminical Hinduism is analyzed looking at the interviews to understand its' influence in the construction of Matuas' religious identities in contemporary times. Responses of Namasudras who belong to other sects than Matua are also discussed here to provide an analysis whether Matuas' are emerging as hegemonic sect and the interactional dynamics of those sects with brahminical Hinduism. The second section of this chapter titled Different Sects and Religious Identities discusses how in the process of constructing religious identities gender norms are maintained and in the patriarchal structure of the family religious identities are constructed according to those patriarchal norms. Looking at the multiple power structures introduced by religious institution as well as the family it is analyzed how agency can be interpreted and how



women negotiate with patriarchal structure within the family and patriarchal norms in religious arena of life.

## **Interactional Dynamics with Brahminical Hinduism: Matuas and other Sects**

Namasudra community was earlier known as Chandals, a lower caste community living in harsh geographical location of east Bengal<sup>1</sup>. In the nineteenth century, rapid reclamation of marshy lands in this area improved their socio economic condition as agriculture based community and a small number of Namasudras following land owning, money lending and other businesses gained wealth. This enabled them to make a self-image radically different from other lower castes in that region and they renamed themselves from Chandals to Namasudras. The first meeting to uplift social status was held in 1881 in the village called Dattadanga of Molarhat sub division of Khulna District (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 387). In 1872, the upper castes refused an invitation by a wealthy Namasudra's for mixed caste commensality resulting in social boycott on the part of Namasudras (Bandyopadhyay 391). Sekhar Bandyopadhyay argued that collective consciousness of Namasudras as a solidified social group resulted from a number of libertine influences like Islam, Christianity and later *bhakti* movement (Bandyopadhyay 388). In Bengal *bhakti* tradition was initiated by Sri Chaitanya and his followers with the aim of salvation of the downtrodden. The egalitarian nature of Vaishnavism introduced by Chaitanya was appropriated later by six *goswamis* of Vrindavan who tied Bengal Vaishnavism to orthodox Indian religion. As a result in Bengal, Vaishnavism lost its radical nature and several Vaishnavite traditions emerged;

the orthodox section did not welcome lower castes, syncretic sect Gaudiya tradition also did not give ritualistic privileges to sudras and lower caste devotees of radical Sahajiya tradition were despised by other Vaishnavite traditions (Bandyopadhyay 388-390). When lower castes and marginalized people were losing their ability to assert themselves a Vaishnavite Namasudra peasant named Harichand of Faridpur, expressing himself as incarnation of god, settled in a place named Orakandi and organized his own sect on the basis of non-ritualistic *bhakti*, later known to be Matua (Bandyopadhyay 392). Initially this sect was formed focusing on betterment of Namasudras only, however later people from any caste or religious backgrounds were welcomed. According to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, the popularity of this sect relied on the subversive qualities. In the congregational life of Matua gender distinction was not prominent. There was no caste based distinction, existence of *gurubaad* or prominence of brahmins who regulated local power dynamics could not be found either (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 401). Guruchand prescribed that the ideal path was to combine bhakti and karma summarized in a dictum – “*hate kam, mukhe nam*” which means work and spell god’s name (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Culture* 97). Harichand advised his sect members to enter into family structure and prescribed them to restrain from sexual promiscuity. These ideas ensured productivity of agricultural based community and inculcated work ethics among depressed sections providing them a chance to be upwardly mobile. Instead of illusory salvation of *bhakti* or leading ascetic’s life, it was suggested in Matua faith to perform duties of the householder (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Culture* 96). This sect clearly challenged brahminical Hinduism by not giving prominence to brahmin *gurus*, combining work ethics with religion and giving equal rights to all. However the

subversive nature was replaced with several orthodox qualities borrowed from brahminical Hinduism. In traditional Hindu families resources and power are distributed according to age generation, sex and in this hierarchical structure women are positioned at the bottom (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 401). Matuas also gradually were following conducts of patriarchal family structure. Initially women enjoyed equal religious rights and gender distinctions were not prominent in the congregational life of Matuas (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 393). Later certain conception surrounding women's role, like chaste woman worshipping husband's feet, assuming service to husband as the highest duty of woman and imagining women as obstacle in the path of salvation became prominent and worshipping parents became highest kind of devotion for all (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 401). Such conceptions of women's role are similar to the ideology of *pativrata* where a woman's devotion to her husband is assumed to be the highest quality and devotion to parents represent hierarchical family structure. Initially there was no prominence of guru, later *gurubad* was introduced and Harichand was imagined as incarnation of Hindu god (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 402-403). In many ways Guruchand advised path of work ethics combined with religiosity was replaced with search of illusory salvation (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 403). Hence the initial subversive qualities of Matuas were replaced by orthodox ideology of brahminical Hinduism. To understand interactional dynamics of brahminical Hinduism with Matua in contemporary times, the interviews done in Khidirpur colony can be analyzed.

One of the Matua respondents Rishi, 60 years old, says about Matua faith "it is...garhasthya dharma...make home with all fulfillments" (Personal Interview. 9 Feb

2019). This statement indicates one has to consider home as the site of religiosity and compare it with ashram or sacred place. Matua devotee Nirmal informed that Guruchand Thakur directed to follow householder's duty for individual prosperity and society's benefit. In other words for the Matuas, family is the most important site of religiosity. In an interview Nirmal's wife Nilima suggests that her object of devotion is husband, more than Harichand and Guruchand (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Such assertion indicates that women are devoted to their husband completely and revere them more than religious icons. Nilima's daughter in law Mitali aged 24 years smiles and with hesitation informed her view about women's position in the household. She said "It is better when they are soft and decent" (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). 25 years old Sulekha, daughter in law of another Matua family, shares her view that "before marriage and after marriage women's condition are different" while in natal household they have the duty to study, after marriage they need to take care of their family and children (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). In the time of interview Sulekha was accompanied by her mother in law. Before answering this question she was hesitating, but her mother in law Amala encouraged her to talk about condition in "father's place" and condition in spousal household. Mitali and Sulekha's hesitation, their silence and smile may indicate that they needed to provide a carefully formulated answer. During discussion with Sulekha her mother in law was talking instead of her. When the interviewer asked Sulekha questions regarding political condition in the village Amala shared her experience "listen sister, we don't go shopping, with bags in our hands, we stay in our home" (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). Her statement indicates how women are prescribed to stay at home and advised not to engage in the public realm. Amala describes herself as guardian of

children and daughters in laws of the household; she calls her husband ‘landlord’ (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). Her statements clearly indicate that in the patriarchal structure of family, hierarchy is maintained according to age, generation and gender; in this power dynamics children and younger women are placed at the bottom. Two generations of women in Matua households present two different pictures. The older women like Amala and Nilima have conformed to the patriarchal codes prescribed by the religious sect and the family. They revere their husbands the most, even more than their religious icons. Sulekha and Mitali are younger generation women who do not perceive their husbands as object of devotion, but they needed to carefully formulate their answers being watched by their upper hand in the family, mothers-in-law. The perceived complicity with patriarchal hierarchy and power of older generation women over younger generation helps to reproduce and enforce those norms across generations.

Older men in the family such as Rishi also believes in gendered norms “there is no jati like men or women, to god no one is man or woman”; according to him in this mortal world a man may appear as *swami* of a woman, but the man also has a *swami*. To that *swami* “we all are women folk, we all are prakriti...” (Personal Interview. 9 Feb 2019). His statement can mean that women in the form of husband have a lord in the mortal world. But god appears as lord to all. The relation between *swami* and his female companions is always hierarchical. Here masculinity is suggested to be placed higher than ‘*prakriti*’ or femininity. In the hierarchical relation between god and devotee, lower position is ascribed to the devotee. Hence the person placed lower irrespective of being male or female is considered as feminine. Mitali’s husband, 36 years old Piyush, feels if the difference between men and women is acknowledged there will be no unrest within

the family or outside. For him women's equal participation in public is alarming in present times because the earlier patriarchal structure of society is disrupted in this way (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). The two male respondents belonging to two different generations are emphasizing that men enforce gendered norms as much as older women do. Rishi being a religious old male tries to say there is no gender based distinction, but his understanding of relation between devotee and god suggests wife is supposed to perceive husband as lord or god. Piyush, being an educated younger generation man has more access to the public domain. He finds women's participation in public life and equal rights in all spheres problematic because it is different from the hierarchical structure he is accustomed with. Such consideration reveals the patriarchal conditioning by the religious faith and the family.

The home appears to the devotees as a sacred place, but the Matuas have imbibed a family structure similar to traditional Hindu families, Bandyopadhyay suggested. According to structure of traditional Hindu families, resources and power are distributed according to age, gender and generation, an aspect clearly emphasized by the above analysis. Here younger women and children are placed at the bottom, they have older women as upper hand, younger men are placed higher and oldest male member in the family holds the patriarchal control over everything. Older women in the Matua households are complicit in enforcing patriarchal norms on younger women. The women are supposed to be devoted enough to their husband, so that they can perceive them as gods. This aspect of utmost devotion to god is similar to *pativrata* ideology prescribed for respectable upper caste women (Chakravarti, ch.4, location 1547, par. 11). The responses of two men discussed above clearly indicate patriarchal assumptions found among

Matuas in contemporary times. Initially in Matua faith gender distinction was not perceived and equal rights were conferred to women (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 393). Later the egalitarian outlook towards gender and subversive reaction to brahminical Hinduism were replaced with gendered assumptions found in brahminical Hinduism. The responses discussed above suggest the influence of brahminical Hinduism in Matuas faith in contemporary times. To understand if Matua sect has conformed within brahminical Hinduism completely their ritual roles can be analyzed.

Nirmal suggested Hindu dharma is the oldest religion, “to save this dharma what is being done is called Matua faith” (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). All Matua devotees identify them as Hindus, and find Hinduism the best religion to follow<sup>3</sup>. However in Hindu religion brahmins are priestly caste. Though Matuas have absorbed several aspects of brahminical Hinduism and asserted Hindu identity, their rituals contradict rituals of brahminical Hinduism. Nimila informed that for Matua rituals brahmin priests are not required, Hindu religious icons are not worshipped either (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Leena added “We worship Harichand and Guruchand, we don’t perform other pujas” and brahmin priests are not required on any occasion (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Nirmal gets religious advisors or upadestha help sometimes, but believes that Matuas need to perform rituals themselves (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Matua faith ritually segregates religious life from brahminic influences as revealed in this case. Another old female devotee Amala says all the family members go to the temple built in the household premise three times a day. To pay devotion they use an instrument named *danka* and each afternoon all the family members together utter “Hari name’s *Vandana*” as a form of prayer (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). The interest to identify themselves

as Hindus, making assertion about Matua faith as an integral part of Hinduism and defying brahminical rituals at the same time seems contradictory. The defiance to brahminical Hinduism showed by Matua rituals helps us understand that Matua is conceptualized as a faith which does not follow rules of brahminical Hinduism. At the same time assertion of Hindu identity may suggest Matuas' interest to be inclusive within larger Hinduism. It can be partially true that Matuas try to be part of larger Hinduism in order to get more prominence and for upward mobility in social and power status. Matuas also feel that all Namasudras should follow Matua religion, because it is the best faith one can choose. Rishi says "I am not capable to make other people understand, if you don't read this book, how would you know what is there in this book?" He emphasizes that Harileeamrita is an essential read for everyone, as other Namasudras do not read this book they divert in to different faiths (Personal Interview. 9 Feb 2019). Rishi's suggestion about Matua to be followed by all Namasudras may indicate hegemonic tendency of Matuas over other religious sects. To understand interactional dynamics of other sects with Matua here responses of Gaudiya Vaishnavites and Anukul Thakur's devotees are analyzed.

Sargar, a 65 years old Gaudiya Vaishnavite in faith, believes "now Matua sect, meaning those who are presently Matua are trying to reverse the religion". According to him Gauranga Mahaprabhu or Sri Chaitanya is the avatar but "a few Matuas say this Hari is original Hari, he is the actual avatar" (Personal Interview. 10 Feb 2019). Sekhar Bandyopadhyay suggested initially there was no ground for *gurubad* and theory of incarnation in Matua, but later conformist tendency of Matuas' introduced the idea that Harichand and Guruchand are incarnation of Hindu gods (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular*



*Religion* 402-403). Being Vaishnavite in faith Sagar assumes illusory salvation is essential because in *bhakti* tradition one is prescribed to leave worldly affairs. Hence Sagar concludes Chaitanya to be the real avatar because “he has left home and went to *leelachal* for *sadhana*”. According to him Harichand and Guruchand cannot be compared to him because “Harichand is family person. He had children, family and everything”. Sagar feels Harichand and Guruchand were “men of higher status” not ordinary people, but they cannot be called gods (Personal Interview. 10 Feb 2019). Another devotee of Vaishnavite faith, 65 years old Shankar, feels “there is only one faith, but humans have divided it.” He acknowledges the sects followed by Namasudra people in this village are not showing defiance to casteist tendency of society, but Matua faith is led by a Namasudra person. He adds earlier Namasudras were depressed class, Harichand and Guruchand’s effort has helped them to earn respect in society. He has noticed that “within Harichand Thakur’s faith Krishna is sometimes disrespected” (Personal Interview. 20 Feb 2019). His observation suggests Matuas do not respect Vaishnavite tradition. Anukul Thakur’s devotee Anima’s experience of participating in Matua festivals ascertains that people from other faith engage in Matua festivals. She says “Harichand Thakur’s festivals take place in different households, they invite us.” She participates in those programs but cannot understand discussion on religious doctrines. She likes the songs and sometimes performs songs of her god Anukul Thakur. According to her, all gods are good, “Hariuchand Thakur is also good, Guruchand Thakur is good, Anukul Thakur is good. If you love one everyone else would be loved” (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). Her statement is indicating that people following other sects are maintaining relationship with Matuas. It can be partially true that the other sects are less

organized and not make hegemonic assertions. Matua is not only a religious institution, but it has emerged as an assertion against the dominance of brahminical Hinduism. The rituals of Matuas indicate clear defiance to brahminical Hinduism today. The other sects like Gaudiya Vaishnavite and Anukul Thakur follow household rituals where this defiance to brahminical Hinduism cannot be perceived. Sagar's guru Biswabandhu is Namasudra. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has referred how organized Vaishnavism followed brahmin order and repudiated non brahmin gurus, a number of sudra gurus who had no formal link to Gaudiya Vaishnavism started attracting lower caste people (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 389). In the book *Sankhipta Biswabandhu Charitamrita* written by Premananda Gossain it is informed Biswabandhu was initiated by a Gaudiya Vaishnavite person<sup>4</sup>. The secretary of the ashrama known as *Biswabandhu Sebashram* informed they have no relation with Matua faith. She also indicated that the rituals in this ashrama are performed by brahmin priests, nobody knows if this Namasudra *gossain* had brahmin devotees or not (Telephonic Interview. 30 April 2018)<sup>5</sup>. Therefore this Gaudiya Vaishnavite sect led by Namasudra *guru* where Namasudra *gurus* cannot have upper caste devotees is hinting at the hegemonic tendency of brahminical Hinduism. In Sagar's household Hindu goddess Laxmi and Saraswati are worshipped in the traditional Hindu way (Personal Interview. 20 Feb 2019). Another Vaishnavite devotee Shankar says brahmin priest are essential for rituals (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). Shankar and Sagar's responses suggest though there is hegemonic brahminical influence in Gaudiya Vaishnavism, the Namasudra devotees do not ritually defy brahminical Hinduism. Prafulla Kumar Das explained Anukul Thakur's philosophy in *An Integral Philosophy of Life* where he emphasized Varna theory or division of society into

different strata is important for prosperity of society and perpetuation of life, because everyone has a place in the society, if s/he demands more than the prescribed limit “self controlled” brahmins limit their transgression with help of martial caste kshtriya<sup>6</sup> (Das 101). Anukul Thakur’s devotee Anima and her husband Nabarun strictly feel brahmin priests are essential, due to shortage of priests sometimes household *pujas* are performed by themselves. Anima says “we need brahmin priests, I also do *puja* myself” (Personal Interview. 26 Feb 2019). The religious sect they are following perpetuate caste ideology as Das suggests. Looking at these responses one may say devotees of Anukul Thakur are ritually following brahminical traditions being part of a sect very much conformist in nature. Vaishnavites are following brahminical rituals though the *sudra guru* has been segregated from brahminical Vaishnavism. Unlike Matuas these two sects do not defy influences of brahminical Hinduism ritually.

The above discussion shows how Matuas ritually defy brahminical Hinduism though the patriarchal family structure indicates Matuas have moved away from the concept of equal rights for men and women, a subversive aspect showing defiance to brahminical Hinduism. Looking at the responses of both Matuas and other two sects’ one can say Matuas defy brahminical Hinduism in terms of the rituals. The importance given to brahmin priests in household rituals of other two sects emphasizes how they are much more absorbed into the rules of brahminical Hinduism. In Matuas’ rituals no brahminical influence can be perceived, but the hierarchical, patriarchal structure of family ensures influence of traditional Hindu family structure. The patriarchal notion regarding roles of women, considering husband as god or lord, fear about women’s participation in public and hierarchical structure of family emphasize influence of brahminical Hinduism to a

certain extent in Matua sect. Interactional dynamics between Matuas and brahminical patriarchy emphasize how they have moved from the subversive tendency to conformist. These responses suggest that religious lives of Namasudras have been influenced to certain extent by brahminical Hinduism. It can be partially true that a section of Namasudras want to be included in the larger religion of Hinduism to gain more prominence forgetting the hegemonic oppression of brahminical Hinduism.

### **Different Sects and Religious Lives**

In this section, we will discuss the religious life of Namasudra devotees belonging to different sects. The aim of this section is to find out the ways in which religious identities of Namasudras are constructed looking at the power dynamics in the family and gendered norms of religious sect. In the above section it is analyzed how Matua faith is not advocating equality of women in religious lives now. The earlier egalitarian ideas regarding gender were replaced with patriarchal assumptions later. Family is an essential site of religiosity for Matuas, because they follow the householder's duty with great devotion. In the hierarchical family structure the male head of the family controls all the resources and takes all the decisions. The responses found in the study show how religious aspects are expected to be interpreted by male head of the family and women perform ritualistic parts of religious activities. In other words in religious lives, gendered norms are reinforced. A Matua devotee Nirmal was extremely sick during the time of interview and suffering a lot while talking. Still he tried hard to communicate his spiritual knowledge to the interviewer. It can be said being male head of the family he tries hard to maintain the gendered assumption meant for him to interpret spiritual knowledge. It was extremely uncomfortable experience for him to talk, but other family members wanted

him to interpret religious aspects and helped him to talk. This incident emphasizes how patriarchal structure conditions devotees in significant ways where the male head is expected to interpret the religious knowledge and a woman is expected to talk about ritualistic part of religion. Nirmal's daughter in law Mitali says, "yes, I perform puja everyday" and gives detail about each ritual the family has to perform. She admitted sometimes that she is unable to understand meaning of rituals, but performs it with others and now she is teaching her 6 years old daughter to take part in the prayer (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). It is not only Matua devotees who have certain codes and conducts for men and women to maintain in religious lives, but devotees of all sects have this gender division of labour between ritual and spiritual knowledge. Pabitra is devotee to Bhaba Pagla who admits that he only pays respect to the god, but "women of the household do the puja" (Personal Interview 26 Feb 2019). His mother talks about how she performs ritual regularly where "flowers and water should be offered to the Thakur" (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). Kakali, female devotee of Anukul Thakur, informed that she is not sure about the theoretical aspects of the religious sect she follows, but she shares ritualistic procedure to perform *istobritti*<sup>6</sup>. In order to perform it correctly she wakes up early in the morning, after uttering *istomantra*<sup>7</sup> keeps an amount of donation in a selective pot. At the end of the month it has to be sent to another devotee's place, from there it is sent to Deoghar, Anukul Thakur's ashram (Personal Interview. 9 Feb 2019). Her explanation of the *istobritti* ritual is different than her husband's explanation. Unlike Kakali, her husband informs implication of this ritual of donation. He says "*istobritti* is like the serving of Vaishnavas". This system was introduced to raise fund for serving

people of any caste, class or religious background in the ashrama, sacred place for all (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019).

Such instances show how men and women invest differently in the spiritual domain of the faith. For the male members ideological and intellectual investment to the theoretical areas of faith becomes important, they try to explain religious knowledge of the sect and logic behind the rituals. In such system religious activities are divided in to two halves – one is the theoretical knowledge which is in all cases interpreted by the male head, the other aspect is the rituals performed mostly by women. To understand how religious lives are influenced by the power dynamics in the family a few other responses will be analyzed. According to the hierarchical family structure male head of the family controls resources and takes all the decisions. Choice of religious sect usually depends on the male head of the household. Nirmal's son Piyush has not received vows in Matua faith till now, but follows a Matua way of life<sup>7</sup>. Gaudiya Vaishnavite Pinaki also has taken vows as his father Sagar was devotee of this faith for a long time. For women choice of sect depends on the decision taken by male head in her spousal household. Piyush's wife Mitali says "I will be in the same sect that my father in law is, as there is a temple in the home" (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Nilima's natal home was Vaishnavite, she did not know much about Matua faith before her marriage. (Personal Interview 24 Feb 2019). However Nilima is devout Matua now and considers her husband as her god. Nibedita is now devotee of Bhaba Pagla, but her parents were devoted to Anukul Thakur. Before her marriage she was given a proposition to take vows in Anukul Thakur's faith, but she rejected the proposition on the ground that her would be spousal household is follower of different sect (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). 25 years old Piya has married recently;

she has not received vows in her natal household, only after marriage she has taken vows in the faith of her husband (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). These responses suggest marriage as an institution play key role for inculcating particular kind of faith in women's lives. This process is naturalized enough and women themselves become complicit in it. To understand if women can assert their agency within this patriarchal structure a few more responses can be discussed.

Pinaki's wife Leena is 27 years old and has taken vows in Gaudiya Vaishnavism like her husband. She has strong disagreements with others on the fact that *guru ma* is a goddess. In the interview she initially described herself as Vaishnavite, after some time she revealed her actual allegiance is to Hindu goddess *Kali*. In her natal family *Kali* was respected most, after marriage she has to show allegiance to different kind of faith where god is assumed father like (Personal Interview. 9 Feb 2019). Similarly, 50 years old Chabi also found a completely different faith system in her spousal household. She states "in our place it is different, there is no gossain... there is gurudeb". Now she is devotee of Bhaba Pagla and testifies she has experienced a completely different religious ambience after coming to her spousal household as her natal family was upper caste. In her natal household she has seen brahmin *gurudeb* initiating people in Vaishnavism (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). In Vaishnavite faith god is perceived to be father like and in Bhaba Pagla's faith mother goddess *Kali* is worshipped. Chabi has shifted from Vaishnavite *pitrisadhana* to *matrisadhana* of goddess *Kali*, just opposite to Leena Chabi responds there was no psychological turmoil caused from this shift, but Leena is still inclined to the belief system of her natal household. Leena is able to assert her agency as she expresses her own opinion about *guru ma* or talks about her devotion. Looking at the

age difference between Chabi and Leena one may say with time allegiance to new faith system becomes stronger. In the patriarchal structure of family women hardly can assert against the authority, but in their statements one can find the agency to make moral judgments. In the earlier section it is discussed how Matua devotee Nilima conforms whole heartedly in the patriarchal structure of family and perceives her husband to be her god. While talking about Matuas in the village she expressed her concern about the division between different Matuas in this village and stated it is better if all remain united (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Despite her conformity with all the patriarchal norms she is able to criticize Matuas in the village. Therefore it can be said women use their agency while conforming to the patriarchal structure. It is not only patriarchal structure within the family women deal with, but religion also offers strict patriarchal codes and conducts for women. To understand the kind of patriarchal structure religious institution provides, respondents were asked about their relation with object of devotion, guru's position in their lives and participation in religious activities.

Lata Mani says a religious subject's relation with the god is "sometimes playful, personal, familiar even quarrelsome" (Mani 11). Devotee of Anukul Thakur, Anima finds very personal relation with her god and talks with him when she is extremely depressed. She informed that upon accidentally losing her young son she was driven by suicidal thoughts. Later she found solace by telling her god to take care of her deceased son and felt stronger thinking her god will protect her other children (Personal Interview. 26 Feb 2019). Devotee to Bhaba Pagla, Pushpa, admits that by remembering god she was able to avoid danger and feels satisfaction taking her god's name each time (Personal Interview 22 Feb 2019). Her daughter in law Nibedita also admits that she calls Bhaba Pagla in the



time of distress (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). Such familiar and dialogic relation with god emphasizes how god is perceived to be someone with whom the devotee has a first-hand relation and can gain strength in the time of despair. Unlike women men think about their relation with god more critically. Anukul Thakur's devotee Nabin feels that his soul is one with the soul of his god (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Pinaki is a devout Vaishnavite and says guru is primarily an object of devotion to him. He shares a father-son relationship with his god. In this process "*guru* is the uniting bridge between me and my supreme god" (Personal Interview. 10 Feb 2019). His father Sagar thinks that in the process of remembering god one can get over all his sins, it is a process of cleaning one's soul (Personal Interview. 10 Feb 2019). Pabitra is devotee of Bhaba Pagla and credits god for his ability of singing. He says "from my childhood I have remembered Bhaba pagla in my inner and outer self" (Personal Interview. 26 Feb 2019). Such assertion makes one believe that women and men have different kind of relationship with their object of devotion. Women perceive more personal playful relation with god, but men intellectually try to communicate and find their position in this relationship, either as son or as involved in the soul of god. The different perception about relation with god or object of devotion in most of the cases indicates men intellectually assess their commitment to god; women's investment in this arena is more ritual oriented, emotional, playful and dialogic. Perhaps it is indicating an institutional structure of religion where *guru* or priest is situated at the top, male members behind them and at the end women, but at the personal level women engage as much as men do, be it in a different way.

The above discussion emphasizes that Namasudras are influenced by brahminical Hinduism. Ritually Matuas are defying brahminical Hinduism, but the gendered norms

followed in the family/religious lives ensure the presence of qualities influenced by brahminical Hinduism. In all cases family structure is strictly patriarchal, therefore choice of religious sect depends on male head of the household. It is the patriarchal institution of marriage which plays an important role in inculcating certain kind of religious belief system. Usually women wait till their marriage to conform to any kind of belief system, because women's conformity in the religious faith of her spousal household is extremely essential for passing the faith on to the next generation. On the other hand religious belief is constructed in a hierarchical way where guru is given the highest position. After him comes male devotees who decide to participate in the faith the guru is representing. He instills the faith in the family and it continues through generations conforming women and children in the system. Like family where resources and power are distributed according to age, gender, generation, in the case of religious belief same structure is maintained, only guru comes as a representative of god placed at the top of the hierarchy. In Matua faith there is less prominence of gurus, they are not ideally placed in higher position. But in the family religious identity of men and women form according to the hierarchical patriarchal structure of family. It can be assumed that women do not find opportunity to assert their agency while situated in the patriarchal structure of family and negotiating with patriarchal structure represented by religion. Also in the hierarchical structure of god, guru, male devotee and female devotee it can be assumed women cannot adequately communicate with object of devotion institutionally as they are placed lowest in the structure. But certain responses from their personal experiences confirm that they perceive god as familiar person or friend on whom they can depend in times of distress. This analysis is reflective of how women negotiate with patriarchal structures in religious

space as well as in the family. In certain cases they assert their agency by criticizing other members of family or commenting on behavior of the religious sect they are part of. One may say in the process of construction of religious identity these gendered assumptions certainly take part. The hierarchical structure of family and religious institution shapes the devotee in certain ways according to those gender norms, but there are alternative assertions of living and experiencing individualised religiosities, instances of resisting patriarchal hierarchy and exploring and experimenting with a personal relation with god. It can be said in the formation of religious identity brahminical Hinduism influences Namasudra people to an extent across all the sects, producing a gender norm to which the devotees conform, but in the personal level they are able to find familiar relationship breaking all the hierarchy and asserting their agency. However, what remains unchanged is the fact that patriarchal institutions of family and marriage reinforce each other. Women, being 'gifts of exchange' between caste brothers in marriage, carry the burden of religious tradition from one generation to another. Women from Namasudra communities have emulated brahmanical patriarchal ideologies such as *pativrata* in large numbers leading us to look at these as patterns of sanskritisation.

Notes:

1. In “Popular religion and social Mobility in Colonial Bengal” Sekhar Bandyopadhyay informed Namasudras or Chandals in east Bengal used to live in the districts named Bakarganj, Faridpur, Decca, Mymensingh, Jessore and Khulna (Bandyopadhyay, 385).
2. Upper caste women are expected to be devoted to her husband, a concept known as *pativrata*(Chakravarti, ch.4, location 1547 par. 13).
3. Two Matua Families were interviewed in this study. All respondents feel they are Hindu. Rishi suggested Matua faith is “Sukshma Sanatana Dharma” and best religion one can follow ((Personal Interview, 9 Feb 2019).
4. The short historiography of Biswa Bandhu is written by his son Premananda Goswami where he said that Biswa Bandhu was initiated by a teacher of Khagail, Bangladesh. His name was Shri Birajmohan Basu, a devotee of Gaudiya Vishnava Sampradaya (Goswami 4).
5. I have also done a qualitative interview based study in a village named Betai where the Biswabandhu Sebashram is located. During the study I have taken this telephonic interview.
6. This is enforcing caste ideology. Ambedkar also described how brahmins with the help of martial caste khatriya regulated the societal hierarchy in ( Ambedkar, Castes in India 4)
7. Ritual of devotees who follow Anukul Thakur. According to this ritual every day in the morning one has to put some amount of donation in a selective pot (Kakali, Personal Interview. 9 Feb, 2019)
8. The mantra one needs to utter while doing istobritti (Kakali, Personal Interview. 9 Feb, 2019)
9. Pyish says “*pita mata gacher gora hari gacher fal*, respect your parents pay devotion to god (Personal Interview 24 Feb 2019).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Construction of Political Identity**

This chapter tries to understand how political identities of Namasudras are constructed in contemporary times by focusing on the way in which ‘caste’ is perceived and the aspects that are playing important roles in construction of Namasudras’ political identity in contemporary times. The chapter is divided in two different sections- i) Caste in Contemporary Times ii) Caste and Political Identity. The first section examines if caste based discrimination is rampant till now. Looking at the interviews done in Khidirpur Colony it is analyzed how reservation policy is perceived by Namasudra respondents. In the second section Caste and Political Identity, we focus on whether caste plays any role in construction of Namasudras’ political identity. Kalyani Thakur Charal, poet author and activist, has been an important respondent for the discussion. She is a Namasudra person and Matua in faith. Jagabandhu Biswas, retired professor of Berhampore Krishnath College, has been another respondent in my study for his experience of engaging in caste based politics. He has worked relentlessly to help marginalized people in different places including Khidirpur Colony. Another of my respondents has been Prafulla Sarkar, retired lecturer of Murshidabad Institute of Technology. He has been one of those interviewed for his engagement and understanding of caste based politics, specifically bahujan politics. The chapter has scrutinized the political behavior and tendency of the Matua community in Khidirpur colony in contemporary times. The study has explored ways in which gendered assumptions, ideologies and practices have played any role in the construction of the political identity of Namasudras.

## Caste in Contemporary Times

Namasudra community is one of the numerically and socio-politically strongest communities amongst various dalit sub castes in West Bengal in contemporary times (Rana, 46). Sekhar Bandyopadhyay informs that Namasudras prior to partition lived in east Bengal in districts named Bakarganj, Faridpur, Dacca, Mymensingh, Jessore and Khulna, in low lying marshy lands. They were called Chandals and placed higher in the caste hierarchy than other lower castes in Bengal<sup>1</sup>. According to few sources Chandals were untouchables, whereas few other documents do not give firm indication of Chandals being untouchables or not, instead call them *antyaaja* or mixed caste<sup>2</sup>. In some districts like Faridpur, Dacca or Jessore, Namasudras were placed in the middle rung of the hierarchy amongst the mixed castes whereas in certain parts they were placed higher than the untouchables<sup>3</sup> (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 385). The land reclamation in nineteenth century helped Namasudras to become peasant community.

In the nineteenth century a section of Namasudras gained wealth by engaging in several trades<sup>4</sup> (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 386). In this period transition from Chandals to Namasudras took place. Religious influences like Islam, Christianity and later *bhakti* helped them to create collective consciousness (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 388). C.S. Mead collaborated with Guruchand and opened a mission school in Orakandi on a plot donated by Guruchand. In first Namasudra delegation Guruchand met Lieutenant Governor of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1907. Such event was translated as an act of recognition from the powerful, an aspect absent in pre British era<sup>5</sup>. During nationalist era Guruchand and Namasudras were disinterested in non co-operation movement, instead they wanted share of political power demanding special privileges as

depressed minority. Guruchand remained in close contact with Nawab of Decca Nawab Salimullah to jointly start anti partition agitation (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 407-410). The Matua Mahasangha emerged as religious symbol of Matua community in 1915 at Orakandi with an ashram for Namasudra students, indicating welfare intentions of Matua Mahasangha (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 411-413). Such gradual advancement of the community was severely ruptured because of partition<sup>6</sup>.

In 1936 historically marginalized section of India was included under the title scheduled caste by the colonial government<sup>7</sup>. Namasudras as a scheduled caste community in east Bengal grew into a politically powerful group (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 414). They condemned the Poona Pact which took away privilege of separate electorate for the scheduled castes. Influential leaders like Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, grandson of Guruchand, won as Independent candidate in 1937. Namasudras also played a key role in reducing Congress to a minority party in Bengal legislative assembly by supporting Krishak Praja Party-Muslim League Coalition government. Though majority of Namasudras wanted to stay in East Pakistan instead of migrating to India, they were forced to come to India because of the violence and adoption of East Pakistan's Islamic constitution<sup>8</sup> in 1956. Unlike Western India where dalit perceived Partition and riot as a matter between upper caste Hindus and Muslims, eastern India faced different consequences. In this region the schedule castes and tribes suffered mostly. Upper castes were able to migrate and settle in India long before. The Indian state provided terrible rehabilitation policy to Namasudra refugees. Namasudra politician Jogendranath Mandal suggested reclamation of fallow lands of Bengal can solve rehabilitation crisis and unemployment in Bengal. Instead Namasudra refugees were sent to inhospitable lands of

Dandyakaranya and Andaman in large numbers (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 252-255). As several families were not able to secure hospitable land in Dandyakaranya they came back to West Bengal and a group among them settled in Marichjhapi, 125 square km uninhabited land of Sundarban. Within a few months they built twelve settlements with basic amenities<sup>9</sup>. but the settlement was termed illegal. After partition while Namasudra peasants had drawn close to communist leadership, incidents like Marichjhapi massacre proved that they had received nothing in return (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 262). Sipra Mukherjee in her essay “Creating Their Own God” argues that in the case of West Bengal, communist discourse largely equated caste with class. After Independence the political discourse of caste was primarily operated by the rhetoric of leftist parties or modernist intellectuals. Therefore caste was perceived only in terms of class based on their economic status, but it was forgotten that caste remains in form of cohesive communities. Interestingly, caste as a term is associated with tradition and religion, whereas class is assumed to derive from the modern, secular discourse of state, citizenship and human rights (Mukherjee 131). Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, in his bid to point out how caste based discrimination is rampant in contemporary times, mentioned the controversy in 2004 regarding the mid-day meal in schools. The upper caste parents had expressed clear objection to the fact that their children will have food prepared by lower caste people proved their casteist mentalities (Bandyopadhyay, *Partition and Ruptures* 455). To understand how caste identity is perceived today, respondents of Khidirpur colony were interviewed about their experience of caste based discrimination.



In this study a few respondents shared their experienced of caste based violence. Nirmal remembered that earlier in Bangladesh Namasudras had a different society, where they had no contact or confrontation with the upper castes (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). He indicated clearly that Namasudras were always segregated from the upper castes. His son Piyush shared his experience of seeing how upper caste students made derogatory comments about scheduled caste students in his college (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Nibedita informs that she has never experienced caste based discrimination in this village as everyone here is Namasudra by caste. She has experienced caste discrimination in her natal home Bethuadahari because the locality was comprised of residents from lower caste as well as upper caste (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). 30 years old Pinaki, a school teacher emphasizes how lower castes face violence from upper castes even today; now upper castes do not use harsh language but express the hatred through their action (Personal Interview. 10 Feb 2019). 65 years old Binoy informed that upper caste families are not willing to form marital relation with Namasudras (Personal Interview. 8 Feb 2019). His wife Jayita shares experience of caste based discrimination in recent times. When they were living as tenants in upper caste household the landlord cleaned the water tap every time after her use. This incident defines one cannot equate class with caste, because the family in question is a middle class family. One cannot say caste based discriminations, like untouchability have disappeared because Jayita experienced this humiliation in the year 2000 (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). To understand whether state policies like reservation help the Namasudras a few more responses can be analyzed.

Suman thinks reservation policy is meant for the improvement of economic condition of the lower castes (Personal Interview. 11 Feb 2019). Nirmal was a school teacher earlier who feels the reason behind adoption of reservation policy is poverty, low representation and backwardness in educational institutions (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). His son Piyush feels that lower castes are not able to avail the reserved quota because of the corrupting practices of the powerful section. Therefore Namasudras are following “shuttering trade or quack medical profession, to earn a bit” (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Pabitra feels only the students seeking government jobs are benefited for reservation system, rest of the scheduled caste people are not affected by it (Personal Interview. 26 Feb 2019). Chabi, Piya, Nilima and Mitali do not know much about reservation policy<sup>10</sup> which may be because they have not participated in the competitive job market. Leena being a school teacher has a good understanding about the importance of reservation system. She informs lower castes or Namasudras are humiliated even today; scheduled caste medical students are subjected to physical abuse for their caste identity. According to her reservation system is extremely important for economic improvement of poor communities; also it encourages them and provides them with psychological support (Personal Interview. 9 Feb 2019).

Mitali’s husband Pinaki is also a teacher by profession and feels that reservation policy is adopted to mainstream the backward section of society, but only the economically disadvantaged people should be given the facility (Personal Interview. 10 Feb 2019). Retired government employee Binoy feels it is humiliating for Namasudras that they are tagged as scheduled caste. According to him categorizing people based on their caste

identity is a racist practice. If a brahmin has one vote, a Namasudra also has one vote, all the rights should be equal for both of them (Personal Interview. 8 Feb 2019).

Looking at these responses one can say among Namasudras there is a tendency to assert as more advanced section of society. Though the economically less solvent section feel caste reservations is necessary, those who have reached the middle class status sometimes feel uncomfortable with their scheduled caste identity<sup>11</sup>. Some Namasudras feel that reservation is meant for economic prosperity only, therefore only the poor section of the society should avail this facility. Kalyani Thakur Charal reminds us that Namasudras are still carrying refugee status and that economic prosperity or idea of being equal to upper castes is unreal. She says, “reservation is not only for economic reasons, reservation is also for representation” (Personal Interview. 16 Feb 2019). Looking at the responses it may be said that Namasudras generally perceive importance of reservation in economic terms and forget necessity of reservation for representation in all spheres. Kalyani Thakur Charal added that the upper castes will not allow any Namasudra candidate to compete in the election if there are no reserved seats (Personal Interview. 16 Feb 2019). Looking at the casteist tendency of society in contemporary times one can say in political sphere reservation may help lower castes to represent themselves.

## **Caste and Political Identity**

In 1980s the contention between the upper caste middle class Hindus and recommendations of Mandal Commission displayed that this middle class sees lower castes/backward castes as threatening identities for aiming to capture social and political spaces which were so far condensed with upper castes. As Sheth puts it, “caste survives, but as a kinship-based cultural community, not as a status group of the ritual hierarchy. It has acquired new economic interest and a political identity. Its members now negotiate and own larger and multiple social and political identities” (Sheth 2508). Thus, state policy of reservation had the lower castes aiming not for registering higher ritual status but rather aspiring for wealth, political power and modern (consumerist) lifestyles. This could help them enter into the category of the ‘middle class’ along with upper castes who already had the advantage of control over resources of their traditional higher status. Mandalised politics thus generated aspirations among lower castes to attain middle class status and lifestyle. The changing social structure therefore enabled a person to become distant from their ritual roles and helped them in acquiring new status and identity of middle class. In the modern context caste has different implication; traditionally the castes emerged as it was depicted in religious scriptures. In contemporary times caste is more associated with the idea of justice and equality. The changing time also enabled lower castes some possibility of having power in economic and political arena. D.L. Sheth documents the reasons behind this transformation. He describes that caste can now be observed in the dimension of secularization, de-ritualization and politicization. Ritual is the potent signifier of a community/caste, the core of this concept is made of religious ideology which generates idea of purity and pollution. It ascertains the way distribution

of resources, political power and specific customs will be maintained. After decolonization the societal structure was reorganized and in this modern state de-ritualization of caste became crucial. Various forms of rituals like commensality or endogamy were brought under scrutiny to investigate their validity in the changing scenario. Sometimes upper caste households and lower caste households are aligning based on the income status. For example, inter-caste marriages, to a certain extent, have become quite acceptable where the socio-economic positions are validated more. The prior hierarchized strata are operated horizontally now as each caste has emerged like politically conscious groups (Sheth 2501-2510).

In 1981 Backward (SC, ST, OBC) and Minority Communities Employee Federation (BAMCEF) was formed by Kanshi Ram with the aim of organizing educated government employees of scheduled caste (SC), scheduled tribe (ST) and other backward castes (OBC). BAMCEF was formed to provide organizational protection to those employees and envisioned to mobilize 85 percent bahujan population against the 15 percent upper caste or dwija castes (Teltumbde 101). Later Kanshi Ram got actively involved in electoral politics with Bahujan Samaj Party, referring *Manusmriti* as the source of all brahminical values governing the social practices (Sonalkar 15). In the state of Uttar Pradesh, BSP was very successful, even during 90's BSP's success on Lok Sabha election was "dazzling" (Teltumbde 120-121). Jagabandhu Biswas, former professor in Berhampore Krishnath College, was active member of BSP from 1987 (Biswas, *Smitir Pata* 289). He was interviewed for his engagement in dalit activism, understanding of bahujan politics and involvement in the area of study as an activist. He informed that "the bahujan movement or the dalit movement in West Bengal never crystallized" as

majority of dalits in Bengal diverted to different political parties (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). According to him for succeeding in dalit politics all dalits in West Bengal should consolidate and assert their rights. Kalyani Thakur Charal said, “Ambedkar is the only man of modern thought and his thought can assail the nation”. As the Indian constitution is based on Ambedkarite thought, preservation of constitutional rights can transform the nation in a positive direction (Personal Interview. 16 Feb 2019). Prafulla Sarkar, former lecturer of Murshidabad Institute of Technology was interviewed in this study as he had engaged in bahujan politics and activism earlier. He is a staunch believer of Ambedkarite thought and stated that Kanshi Ram’s initiative to organize dalit movement in Bengal failed due to lack of an apt political leader. Looking at the contemporary situation he does not find any future of bahujan politics in Bengal because “the earlier current of left politics and presently powerful TMC party has pushed the possibility of dalit movement backwards” (Personal Interview. 23 Feb 2019).

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay informed Namasudras who were able to remain in West Bengal to choose the path of education as suggested by Guruchand. The power base of Matua community held by P. R. Thakur supported government’s rehabilitation policy initially. P. R. Thakur became Minister of State and Tribal Development, but in 1964 had to resign from the assembly on the ground of Congress governments attack on the refugees in Bangaon. Disillusioned by the unsympathetic rehabilitation policy of the government he felt the need for uniting the community, now dispersed across region. He decided to revive Matua Mahasangha (MM) in 1986 which started disseminating religious messages similar to the acts of *gosains* and *pagols* in nineteenth century. MM professed its goal to bring religion based modernity by fighting against social vices like casteism, superstitions

and economic backwardness. MM at present is a centralized organization with a spiritual head, organizational head and central executive committee. It initially prohibited members from participating in politics; members do not mention themselves as dalits or refer to Ambedkar on any occasion. This sangha does not confront mainstream Hinduism, but opposes brahminical rituals and domination. Their agenda is to remain devoted to education and social welfare while transcending the oppressed past. In 2003 National Democratic Alliance amended the Citizenship Act by denying right of citizenship to those arriving after 25<sup>th</sup> March 1971 which adversely affected the Namasudra community. MM organized protests to repeal the act without any result so far (Bandyopadhyay 269-272). Namasudra drifted from Left politics from 1998-99 as they received nothing in return, Bandyopadhyay records one MM official's opinion (270). Mamata Banerjee and TMC party was chosen over other political parties by Matua voters as Mamata Banerjee sought membership of Matua community. It was something astonishing for MM considering her brahmin identity. In 2010 she was appointed the chief patron of MM but she had carefully avoided MM's main demand of amendment of the Citizenship Act (271). Currently Mamata Bala Thakur claims to be Sanghatipati of Matuas who is also Trinamul MP from Bangaon. Her relative Santanu Thakur also claims to be Matua Sanghadhupati who is currently aligning a section of Matua with BJP<sup>12</sup>. The issue regarding the division of Matua Sanghadhipatis based on political interest is much debated among Namasudra respondents. To analyze whether the tendency is supported by Namasudra people or not a few interviews done in Khidirpur Colony can be analyzed.

A few respondents who are not Matua, support Matuas' political participation. Binoy feels for Thakurnagar's interest Main Upadestha involved with certain political party. A

few bhakts may have entered into politics seeing the Gurus, but not all can do that (Personal Interview. 8 Feb 2019). Bilas finds Matuas' political participation as logical as they will get government help for their work. According to him, involvement of religion in politics helps in many cases (Personal Interview. 11 Feb 2019). Nabarun regarding Matuas' political participation says everyone has an opinion, it is not right that due to political participation they are getting divided. According to him religious belief indeed influences political belief (Personal Interview. 20 Feb 2019). Nilima is a Matua devotee who says a few Matuas are participating in politics now and she likes their participation. According to her this political behavior is meant for welfare of everyone. Also she claims religion and politics are two separate spheres and these two cannot influence each other (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Like her Rishi also feels that for citizenship political involvement is necessary, however there is no relation between his faith and political participation (Personal Interview. 9 Feb 2019). Rishi's statement emphasizes that political participation of Matuas in contemporary times largely depends on their fear caused from Citizenship Amendment Act (2003).

A number of devotees who are not Matua feel that political participation is wrong as the Matua Mahasangh is based on religion. Nabin says, "those who are godly creatures they should not remain in politics..." He argues political participation may create divide within the community because all may not agree with dominant strand of political ideology (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). 55 years old Anima says regarding political participation "I don't like it, Matuas will go here and there and make things troublesome, I don't like that" (Personal Interview. 26 Feb 2019). Sagar feels political participation of Matuas is dirty, "in Thakurbari those who are respected, why would they seek



candidature in vote, for what kind of greed, for what hope? I don't like it." According to him religious belief cannot influence political belief in any way (Personal Interview. 10 Feb 2019). His son Pinaki believes it is not right for a religious to give political issues importance, because it is not helping the society in any way. He thinks indirectly religious faith influences political belief, keeping in mind that presently politicians are mixing politics with religion. Such move emotionally blackmails the voters (Personal Interview. 10 Feb 2019). Mitali and her husband Piyush belong to a Matua family. They do not feel political participation of Matuas is right. Piyush says those Matuas participating in politics are motivated by personal interest. This politicization of Matua community has come into forefront as the present Chief Minister of West Bengal has recognized the community. According to him "those who call themselves Matua but do not work accordingly" participate in politics to gain the power (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019).

The above mentioned responses emphasize that devotees believe in a clear divide between religious or spiritual thought and participation in politics or thinking about worldly affairs. However in a few cases respondents feel political participation is essential for survival, but that does not affect religious thought at all. Matuas' political stand is supported by many devotees of different sect. Those who do not feel Matuas' participation in politics is right they argue as a religious institution Matua should avoid politics or worldly affairs. But historically Matua faith has emerged as a reaction to brahminical Hinduism, later it engaged in social welfare. Guruchand and his family were always involved in politics. His grandson P. R. Thakur was minister of West Bengal Assembly (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 264). In Thakurnagar P.R. Thakur recreated

Matua Mahasangha as a symbolic axis of Matua faith as he felt reservation was not helping all scheduled caste population (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 265). Prafulla Sarkar acknowledges that Matua as a movement had several possibilities, but they did not form consolidated political party. Instead they have divided into branches- one is BJP another is TMC. But these political parties are mobilizing them for their own gains (Personal Interview. 23 Feb 2019). Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has noted that Matua Mahasangh has never Ambedkarized their movement or called themselves as dalit (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 272). Kalyani Thakur informed that there is not much difference between Matua leader Guruchand and thoughts of Ambedkar. B. R. Ambedkar wanted dalits to “educate, agitate, organize” to be able to assert themselves. Similarly Guruchand also attempted to uplift the community by promoting education, prescribed hard work for economic advancement and advised to get politically involved. She adds, “Guruchand has said those words whatever has been said by Babasaheb, but Matuas don’t accept that” (Personal Interview. 16 Feb 2019). Therefore it can be said in the construction of political identity caste as a category does not play an important role among Matuas. To understand how Namasudras’ political identity is formed a few responses can be analyzed.

A few Namasudra people in Khidirpur Colony show allegiance to the political party presently in power. Shankar informs that presently Trinamul Congress is in power in their area and that the elected Pradhan has done one significant thing- “we have received a value of the land, a patta is given, we are living on this land for more than 70 years” (Personal Interview. 20 Feb 2019). Pabitra is also satisfied with present political party’s work. He mentions road related work in this village, rice for 2 rupee per kilo, for girls’

Kanyasree scholarship and Rupasree scheme for daughter's marriage as good initiative of TMC (Personal Interview. 26 Feb 2019). His mother and wife also mention good performance of the current political party in power<sup>13</sup> Nirmal remembers how during the rule of CPI(M) students used to get jobs as school service commission regularly recruited teachers for government schools. Presently there is no such opportunity as “no son of this colony is getting any job” (Personal Interview. 16 Feb 2019). Binoy believes in Khidirpur no party has done anything for the interest of public. He questions the validity of the patta that is distributed currently. Also he feels Namasudras usually are not able to find prominent position in politics but in Khidirpur Namasudras are able to find proper position because here everyone is Namasudra (Personal Interview. 8 Feb 2019). Though he has not referred about caste politics his statement may indicate caste as a category play important role in construction of political identity, because lower castes find less prominence in politics. To understand whether gendered assumption plays any role in construction of political identity a few responses will be analyzed.

A few women are enthusiastic about political activities in the village. Nibedita refers to the cemented roads renovated recently (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). Her mother in law Pritha says “roads have been made, also the widow pensions are been given... they have given forms for the pension of jobless people” (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). Mitali feels that the current party TMC is working moderately. She informed “they made this cemented paths, previously no road was there in this village”. Regarding women's political participation she says “they are participating in this village. They have become members. Both of them are women” (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). Unlike her, Nilima, her mother in law, does not know anything about the political scenario in this

village (Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019). 50 year old Chabi also says regarding political condition in the village, “I can’t say much. I am wife material”(Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). 60 years old Amala replied “we do not go to market with bags in our hand” when her daughter in law Sulekha was asked about political condition in the village (Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019). Therefore it can be said a few women are interested about political scenario in the village, but a good number of women feel less interested in these aspects. To understand if there is any gendered assumption about women’s political participation a few more responses will be analyzed.

Shankar says regarding women’s political participation “they can do, if they want, but they are not allowed to do anything”. According to him female members in the Panchayat are more prone to be influenced by powerful people, than men. Women usually refrain from taking any action because they are afraid (Personal Interview. 20 Feb 2019).His elder sister Rita says that women can engage in politics “but nobody pays heed to their words, not from Anchal or from BDO office”(Personal Interview. 20 Feb 2019). Regarding women’s political participation Pabitra says “now when in our state Chief Minister is woman, they can work for village” and a few efficient women are becoming more influential than men (Personal Interview. 26 Feb 2019). These responses suggest there is no gendered assumption from the part of the respondents about political participation of women, but women working as members of Panchayat are pressurized for patriarchal structure of the institution they feel. Suman feels differently about women’s political participation. He argued that women are taking positions as there is women’s quota, but the actual work is done by men in the committee, women do not go everywhere, men go. Therefore they do nothing but only give their signatures (Personal

Interview. 11 Feb 2019). Binoy also feels that women are not interested in politics, but they are forced to serve in the Panchayat because of the quota given to women (Personal Interview. 8 Feb 2019). However his wife Jayita argues “educated women are not coming in politics, compared to them those men in politics are bit more educated”. According to her lack of education is one of the reasons for women’s weaker performance in politics in this area (Personal Interview. 8 Feb 2019). Therefore in certain cases women are encouraged and supported to engage in the politics. A few women are interested about political activities, however good numbers of women feel they should not engage in these affairs. A few men also feel women’s participation is forceful and inconvenient. Looking at these responses it can be said in the construction of political identity gendered assumption are an integral part among Namasudra respondents. Here women’s quota is helping them to be visible in the political arena, otherwise the patriarchal structure of family and institution may not accept their participation.

The above analysis suggests how Matua is not solely a religious institution, but it has a history of political involvement. In contemporary times Matua leaders are getting involved in different political parties as discussed above. Looking at the political tendency of Matuas it can be said that they are able to balance religious and political at the same time and try to be inclusive in the power structure. Devotees perceive political and religious activities as separate spheres, but in certain cases a few Matua and non Matua Namasudras opined that political participation is needed for survival. Looking at the political tendency of Matua leaders one may say caste as a category has not played any role in construction of political identity for them. Most of the respondents did not mention importance of caste in construction of their political identity in the interviews

done in Khidirpur Colony. The organization BAMCEF focused on educated dalits who work in government posts. Looking at the interviews it can be said people who are not falling in this elite category are less knowledgeable about caste based politics or bahujan politics. In patriarchal assumption women are imagined as less involved in the public, therefore women's engagement in the politics is viewed as forceful and inconvenient. In other words reserved seats help in gaining women visibility in politics. Looking at these issues it can be said that gendered assumptions play an integral role in construction of political identity of Namasudras as found in the interviews done in Khidirpur Colony.

In this chapter it is discussed how caste based discrimination is rampant in contemporary times. The experience of caste based violence or humiliation at the hand of upper castes reveal inherent casteist nature of society. The scheduled caste Namasudra respondents perceive reservation in economic terms only, but reservation also provides chance of representation to the lower castes, as Kalyani Thakur Charal has suggested. In the secular state caste is deritualized. Now caste is not perceived in terms of religious scripture or purity and pollution, but caste as a discourse is thought in terms of human rights and equality. Caste has also become a viable category to mobilize people politically. In 90's the dazzling electoral success of BSP on the basis of bahujan politics proves it. But in the case of Matuas it seems that caste as a category has not played any key part in constructing their political identity in contemporary times. Matuas were always politically engaged as it can be seen from the time of Guruchand and now they are engaging with different political parties. The respondents of Khidirpur Colony either support the political party which is in power now in this area, or they criticize it. But they do not refer if caste as a category played any role politically as a caste based movement.

Also in the formation of political identity gendered assumptions play certain role here. Women's political participation is negatively criticized because women have to break the traditional public-private divide to participate in electoral politics. The gendered assumptions of women being weak, powerless, vulnerable and dependent make men assume that women are not suitable for electoral politics. Therefore, it is not surprising that a few respondents remarked that the patriarchal institutional structures of state, family and community, and lack of education or oppression of the authority bars women from taking any positive action. Therefore it can be said Namasudras' political identity is constructed maintaining gendered assumptions, they engage with different political parties currently in power and here caste as a category does not play prominent role as it can be found in the interviews done in Khidirpur Colony.

## Notes

1. Such as Dom, Hadi, Bagdi who were denied access to Hindu society in early twentieth century.
2. The author of *Bangiya Jatimala* informs that Chandals were placed higher in the caste hierarchy than other lower castes in Bengal, such as Dom, Hadi, Bagdi who were denied access to Hindu society in early twentieth century. According to *Manusmriti* and *Vyasamhita*, Chandals were untouchables, whereas *Brahmavaivartapuranam* and *Brihaddharmapurana* do not give firm indication of Chandals being untouchables or not, instead calls them *antyaja* or mixed caste (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 385).
3. Some other sources like writings of *smritikara* Raghunandan in sixteenth century Bengal suggested connubial and commensal restriction with Namasudras, but does not express their touch must be avoided by all means (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 385).
4. A small section of Namasudra moved up social order by taking professions like landowning, moneylending, several trades and later to education. (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* p. 385).
5. Immediately after this Guruchand's associates were appointed in British Government's services (Bandyopadhyay, *Popular Religion* 408).
6. The organized Namasudra movement disappeared after 1947 as the pressure of partition politics, communal mobilization, violence and displacement forced them to align with the mainstream political parties like Congress and Hindu Mahasabha (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 273).
7. India historically marginalized people on the socio-economic, cultural, religious levels known sometimes as *Panchamas*, *Asprushya*, *Achhuts* or *Antyaja* were later included by colonial government under the title scheduled castes in 1936 (Telumbde 1).
8. Foremost Namasudra politician Jogendranath Mandal joined Liaquat Ali ministry in East Pakistan and remained in his position till 1950's. The othering initiated by Pakistan termed Namasudras as Hindu rebels and in 1949 Namasudra peasants of Kalshira and 22 neighboring village in Khulna were murdered, creating enough fear for Namasudras to leave East Pakistan. In 1950 500 families, in 1951 1.5 million refugees and in 1956 3.2 million refugees crossed the border of West Bengal (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste protest* 251-252).
9. In 1978 about 1.2 million refugees mostly Namasudras returned from Dandya Karanya and 30 thousands of them were mobilized by the Udbastu Unnyanshil Samiti under the leadership of Satish Mandal and arrived at Marichjhapi (Bandyopadhyay 261).
10. Chabi, Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019.  
Piya, Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019.  
Mitali, Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019.  
Nilima, Personal Interview. 24 Feb 2019.
11. In this study Binoy's family was economically solvent. Pinaki's family is middle class as well. Rests of the families are less solvent than them.
12. Chakraborty, Sanjib. "West Bengal BJP Keeps options open on PM Narendra Modi's rally venue. *Times of India*. 28 Jan. 2019. Web. 23 April 2019.
13. Nibedita Personal Interview. 22 Feb 2019.  
Pushpa. Personal Interview 22 Feb 2019.



## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

The qualitative interview based study done in Khidirpur Colony presents the condition of Namasudras in contemporary times. The interviews suggest that legal dispute regarding ownership of the land still persists in this village. The history of rehabilitation and refugee crisis in West Bengal suggests high caste Hindu *bhadraloks* suffered less in terms of rehabilitation. As Namasudra peasants being tied to their lands arrived late in India, they had fewer opportunities to rehabilitate (Bandyopadhyay 252). The marginal people who were displaced from Bangladesh are trying to find proper settlement for a long time, but as the study suggests land related crisis have not ended for them. The migrant people from Bangladesh are still not sure about their claim of citizenship because of the legal complication and political issues surrounding it. The interviews are showcasing how displacement is not only imbued with critical political discourse, but there are subjective pains implying emotional, economical, socio-political and psychological suffering. Even now respondents find their Hindu identity as vital, it is important to remember Namasudras were termed Hindu refugees after entering India. The land related conflict, rehabilitation crisis, politicization of Namasudras as Hindu refugees and the debate surrounding citizenship indicate the complexity of the situation. It can also be said the religious identity Hindu cannot be separated from political connotations.

To understand the interactional dynamics with brahminical Hinduism, Namasudra respondents from different religious sects were interviewed in this village including Matua sect. It has been perceived Matuas ritually defy brahminical Hinduism, but the

gendered norms followed in family/religious lives prove presence of qualities influenced by brahminical Hinduism. In the patriarchal structure of family resources and power are distributed according to age, generation and gender. The choice of religious sect in this hierarchical structure depends on the male head of the household. Marriage plays key role in instilling certain kind of belief system in women and women's conformity to the religious belief of spousal home is essential. Women being gifts of exchange in the institution of marriage carry the burden of religious tradition from one generation to another. In the religious lives the hierarchical structure of family is maintained, only the guru comes as a representative of god and placed at the top of the hierarchy. The devotees are shaped in many ways by the gendered norms of patriarchal family and religious institution, but one can find alternative assertion of living and experiencing individualised religiosities, instances of resisting patriarchal hierarchy and exploring and experimenting with a personal relation with god. The conformity to brahminical Hinduism is reflected in how women from Namasudra communities have emulated brahmanical patriarchal ideologies such as *pativrata* in large numbers leading us to look at these as probable patterns of sanskritisation. However, further research needs to be done to understand these complexities in more details.

The gendered norms found in religious lives of Namasudras indicate they have conformed to brahminical Hinduism to certain extent. Initially Matua sect emerged as subversive sect defying brahminical Hinduism but Matua Mahasangh now does not confront Hinduism or restrict devotees from participating in Hindu rituals (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste Protest* 268). Other religious sects in many ways carry casteist tendencies, but the devotees do not confront those tendencies in any occasion. However

caste based discrimination is quite rampant and few respondents shared their experience of humiliation at the hand of upper castes. In the secular state caste has been deritualized and it is no longer perceived in terms of religious scriptures or purity and pollution, but caste as a discourse is thought in terms of human rights and equality. However, my research finds evidence to the further even now though in masked forms. In contemporary times caste has also become a viable category to mobilize people politically. Looking at the political tendency of leaders in Matua Mahasangha it can be said that caste plays a limited role in constructing their political identity. The respondents in Khidirpur colony also do not perceive caste playing any major role other than in construction of their political identity. The organization BAMCEF which mobilized people in bahujan politics only attracted dalits working in government posts. Therefore people who are not falling in this elite category do not have much idea about caste based politics.

In certain cases women's political participation is negatively criticized because women have to break the traditional public-private divide to participate in electoral politics. The gendered assumptions of women being weak, powerless, vulnerable and dependent make men assume that women are not suitable for electoral politics. The gendered assumptions found in religious lives suggested Namasudras have tendency to conform to brahminical Hinduism. Women from Namasudra communities have emulated brahmanical patriarchal ideologies such as *pativrata* in many ways and one can perceive this aspect as probable patterns of sanskritisation, which require further investigation. In the construction of political and religious identities gendered assumptions are playing an important role. Looking at the religious experiences of Namasudras it can be said that in recent times

Namasudras want to be included within the larger fold of Hinduism and want to be referred as 'Hindus' vis-à-vis Muslims. Does that imply a certain homogenization of the religious community of Hindus is a question which can be probed further. The socio-political group identity of Namasudras is definitely based on their caste identity but their focus in electoral politics is less to do with resisting and confronting the hegemonic power of the upper-castes and more about aligning with majoritarian political parties in power such as the TMC and BJP as reflected in the case of Matua Sanghadhipatis. It is only this strategy of gaining political power which might help when their claim to citizenship is at stake. This also reveals the successful ways in which powerful upper-caste political parties are able to appropriate caste issues to further de-radicalise and depoliticize the resistive powers and to silent 'different' voices of the Namasudras. Therefore it can be said Namasudras in West Bengal have not rehabilitated properly, the religious lives of Namasudras indicate they have conformed to brahminical Hinduism to an extent, Namasudra women are negotiating with norms influenced by brahminical patriarchy, the religious sects Namasudras follow absorbed the brahminical ideologies and devotees do not confront them, their experience of caste based discrimination proves casteist tendency of society but caste as a category does not play a 'radical' role in the construction of their political identity. It can be said for Namasudras religion and political are not separate aspects but they engage with each other. This study has several limitations because Namasudra people of a fixed geographical location were interviewed. More empirical works are needed in this area.

## Works Cited

Ambedkar, Babasaheb Bhimrao. *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*. Punjab: Patrika Publications, n.d. Web. 31 July 2018.

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. "Partition and the Ruptures in Dalit Identity Politics in Bengal." *Asian Studies Review* 33.4 (2009): 455-467. Web. 24 April 2018.

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. "Popular Religion and Social Mobility in Colonial Bengal: The Matua Sect and the Namasudras." *Caste in Modern India*. ed. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar. New Delhi: Parmanent Black, 2018. Print.

Biswas, Jagabandhu. *Smritir Pata Theke*. Berhampore: Shilpanagari Printers, 2018. Print.

Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. New Delhi: Sage. 2018. Kindle ebook file.

Charal, Kalyani Thakur. *Ami Keno Charal Likhi: An Autobiography of Kalyani Thakur Charal*. Kolkata: Bibhuti Printing Works, 2016. Print.

Das, Prafulla Kumar. *An Integral Philosophy of Life*. S.P: Satsang Publishinh House, 1977. Print.

Debi Chatterjee. "Udbastu Manush, Antorjatik Ain o Bharatbarsha" *Nir*. Chunikotal Dibos 2009: 80-84. Print.

Guru, Gopal. "Dalit Women Talk Differently". *Economic and Political Weekly* 30.41/42 (1995): 2548-2550. Web. 7 January 2019.

Harding, Sandra, ed. *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. Print.

Moon, Vasant, comp. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*. 1st ed. Vol. 3. New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 1987. Print.

Mukherjee, Sipra. "Introduction: The Language of Religion." *The Language of Religion: Exploring the Politics of the Sacred*. Ed. Sipra Mukherjee. New York: Routledge, 2018. Print.

Mukherjee, Sipra. "Creating their own gods: Literature from margins of Bengal." *Dalit Literatures in India*. ed. Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak. New Delhi: Routledge, 2016. Web. 22 April. 2018.

Nair, Janaki. "Faith, Belief, Piety and Feminism: Beyond an Awkward Relationship". *Economic & Political Weekly* LII (2017): 42-43. Web. 22 April 2018.

Panjabi, Kavita. *Unclaimed Harvest: An Oral History of the Tebhaga Women's Movement*. Zubaan Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2017. Print.

"Purposive Sampling". *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Method*. Vol. 2. 2008. Print.

Rana, Santosh, and Kumar Rana. *Paschimbange Dalit o Adivasi*. Kolkata: Gangchil, 2018. Print.

Rege, Sharmila. *Against The Madness of Manu: B. R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahminical Patriarchy*. New Delhi: Navayana Publishing Pvt Ltd, 2016. Print.

Rege, Sharmila. "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit". *Economic and Political Weekly* 33.44 (1998): WS39-WS46. Web.7 January 2019.

Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste Writing Gender*. New Delhi: Zubaan Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2013. Print.

Reinharz, Shulamit. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.1992. Print.

Sonalkar, Wandana. "Translator's Introduction." *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*. Ed. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2014. Print.

Teltumbde, Anand. *Dalits: Past, Present and Future*. London: Routledge, 2017. Print.