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Introduction

It is widely known that organised Scheduled Caste movements are not that powerful in West Bengal as they are in some other provinces of India. But that does not mean that caste has disappeared from Bengal; the midday meal controversy in 2004 is a glaring evidence of that.¹ The situation underscores the importance of that unanswered question: if caste discrimination still persists, then what happened to all those powerful voices that protested against it so forcefully before 1947? There can be many explanations.² This essay seeks to deal with one aspect of that broad question and suggests that the trauma of Partition and the consequent physical displacement and dispersal of a large section of the Scheduled Castes in Bengal ruptured and destabilised their organised social movement in such a way that their identities were to be redefined and strategies of survival rescripted in a different language. Partition was a complex political phenomenon and had a long history in Bengal. If we take such a long view, we shall find that the Scheduled Caste peasants were directly involved in and deeply affected by Partition. Their migration from East to West Bengal started from 1950 and has continued ever since. The large scale presence of Dalit peasant refugees changed the texture of politics in postcolonial West Bengal, where Partition had led to a rephrasing of the idioms of victimhood and protest. This new discourse focused almost exclusively on the predicament of displacement and the challenges of resettlement of the refugees struggling against an official rehabilitation plan that proposed to disperse them over a wide geographical region outside Bengal. Within this political context, the Dalit became ‘refugees’ – or the refugees became the new Dalit. While the ‘refugees’ were never a homogenous category, yet in the interest of a united struggle, the vocabulary of caste was deliberately purged from the discourse of this movement. The new idioms of protest could be more easily absorbed into the modern tropes of social justice deployed by the left-liberal ideologies of the mainstream political parties and the state. This did not mean that caste question was resolved; this only implied that caste became less important in the public discourse of social and political protest. However, becoming less important did not mean complete disappearance; and the Dalit also adjusted to the new realities of post-Partition West Bengal in myriad ways. In other words, there are

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multiple narratives of Dalit victimhood and protest, and this paper seeks to highlight that plurality of Dalit experience.

Negotiating space: Dalits in Pre-Partition Bengal

The social movements that began to assert Dalit identities in Bengal started in the 1870s and had two very clearly identifiable geographical locations and two communities were at the forefront of these movements. One was the Rajbansi community which lived mainly in the north Bengal districts of Rangpur, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and the Princely State of Cooch Behar.³ The other community, the Namasudras of east Bengal, lived mainly in the districts of Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna, but were also scattered in other eastern and central Bengal districts.⁴ The other Scheduled Caste group that was also organised were the Paundra-Kshatriyas of south Bengal. But they were numerically small and organisationally not as powerful as the other two groups. Apart from these three major communities, the other Scheduled Castes of Bengal were demographically so dispersed and economically so backward and dependent that we do not see much of their presence in organised Scheduled Caste politics in the colonial period.

So when the Scheduled Caste political movement started in Bengal in the early twentieth century, the Namasudras and Rajbansis provided the majority of its leaders and supplied its main support base. For both these communities, their close geographical location was a major factor behind successful social mobilisation, and both lost this spatial capacity as a result of Partition. However, even before Partition, in the last days of the Raj their movements lost homogeneity and were heading in a variety of directions as a result of the interplay of a complex set of historical factors.

In 1945 the Namasudra leader Jogendra Nath Mandal started the Bengal provincial branch of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation. He believed that the Dalit and Muslim peasants in east Bengal had similar interests, and so, a Dalit-Muslim political alliance was in the best interest of the Dalit. But his pro-Muslim League stance was not acceptable to many of his fellow Dalit leaders, who were wary of their future in a Muslim majority Bengal. The history of Dalit and Muslim peasant relationship was not an uninterrupted story of harmony and co-operation; it was regularly interrupted by violent riots. So, around this time, there were two other rival Scheduled Caste organisations: the Depressed Classes League, headed by another Namasudra leader Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, supported the Congress, while the Depressed Classes Association, led by yet another Namasudra leader Birat Chandra Mandal, was more directly aligned with the Hindu Mahasabha.⁵ In other words, the Scheduled Castes, and the Namasudra community which represented them, remained intensely divided on the Partition issue in 1946-47, and were also strategically aligned with various mainstream political parties, such as Muslim League, Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha.

The 1946 riots in Calcutta and Noakhali brought further rift that went beyond the ranks of the Dalit leadership and caused even greater damage to their identity politics. Mandal remained a minister in the Muslim League ministry of H.S. Suhrawardy, widely believed to be the mastermind behind the Great Calcutta Killing, and this made him intensely unpopular among the caste Hindus. Mandal, and the Bengal branch of the Scheduled Caste Federation which he was leading, continued to oppose Partition and advocated a united sovereign Bengal. In a situation like this, when the Hindu Mahasabha launched its campaign to partition Bengal in order to create a Hindu majority province of West Bengal within the Indian Union, and Congress endorsed it after the Tarakeswar Convention in April 1947, many Namasudras became actively associated with this movement. Their major concern

at this stage was to keep their habitat – the districts of Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore, and Khulna – within the Hindu majority province of West Bengal.⁶

However, it will be wrong to conclude that Dalit protest was lost in the quagmire of Partition politics – one need not in this context undermine the importance of class in shaping their political protest. In 1946, when the communist-led share-croppers' movement, known as the Tebhaga movement, started, the Rajbansis in north Bengal and the Namasudras in east and central Bengal were its main protagonists. Its impact on the Rajbansi movement was more divisive, as it involved direct confrontation – in many areas bitter armed conflicts – between the Rajbansi *jotdars* (large land holding peasants who were the main targets of this movement) and the Rajbansi *adbiars* (sharecroppers). In this poor peasants' movement, class had clearly overtaken caste as a mobilising force and divided the identity politics of the Rajbansis and the Namasudras.⁷ In other words, in the last days of the Raj, the Dalit movements in Bengal were heading in myriad directions. And then, the Partition and the resultant displacement imposed on these Dalit communities completely different realities, forcing on them a different kind of struggle.

Partition, Displacement and Dalit Migration

For the Dalit peasants, the Partition did not solve their problems, as, despite their vehement protestations, all the districts which the Namasudras lived in went to East Pakistan. The position of the Rajbansis was even more complicated, as their ethnic territory was divided by the new international political boundary.⁸ But most of them did not – or could not – migrate immediately. In Bengal, the migration of refugees took place in waves – not as a cataclysmic movement of large bodies of population as in Punjab. The first wave of refugees mainly consisted of the more wealthy classes, mostly upper caste Hindu gentry and the educated middle classes with jobs, including many of the Namasudra middle classes as well, who could sell or arrange exchanges of properties.⁹ Very few Namasudra peasants migrated at this stage or could afford to move, because migration required resources which they lacked. Also leaders like Mandal and the Federation advised them to stay put, because they were assured by Jinnah that they would get a fair deal in Pakistan, where 'every man would be equal.'¹⁰ In a celebratory message on Jinnah's birthday in December 1947, Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin repeated that solemn pledge: 'Pakistan is not the state of Muslims alone, it belongs to all peoples and communities who live in it and who are loyal to it.'¹¹ Many Scheduled Caste peasants who stayed back in East Pakistan believed him.

But as the situation gradually unfolded itself, those Namasudras soon found that the growing power of Islamic nationalism of the Pakistani state unmistakably ascribed to them a 'Hindu' *minority* identity. Jogendra Nath Mandal chose to remain in Pakistan and joined the Liaquat Ali Khan ministry as its Labour and Law Minister. He remained in this position until 1950, and all this time, he alternated between representing the larger Hindu minority interests on the one hand and championing the specific Scheduled Caste identity on the other.¹² As for the Namasudra peasants, they were subjected to a process of 'Othering' initiated by the Pakistani state as it moved towards greater Islamization of the polity. The projected 'Other' of the Pakistani nation was the 'Hindu' – a category that tended to collapse the differences between all non-Muslims and incorporated the Dalit.¹³ And, therefore, even when the Namasudra peasants fought for social justice under communist leadership in 1948, the state in Pakistan represented the Namasudra peasant rebels as 'Hindu' miscreants.¹⁴ This process of 'Othering,' not only tended to exclude them from the Pakistani nationhood by imposing on them a 'Hindu' identity, but also helped the corresponding Hindu nationalism in India in trying to appropriate them as oppressed Hindu minority.

Yet, there were still significant differences between the Scheduled Caste peasants and the caste Hindu minorities left in East Pakistan. As Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated in January 1948, the vulnerability of the Muslim minorities in India became explicit. This had repercussions in Pakistan, particularly at a time when Jinnah became incapacitated by illness. His influence on politics began to wane, and that old guarantee of protection for the minorities no longer worked. Under the growing pressure of Islamic nationalism, thousands of caste Hindus began to migrate. According to one report, 1,870,535 Hindu refugees had migrated from East to West Bengal by February 1949.¹⁵ But, even at this stage, the Scheduled Caste peasants did not migrate, although they felt quite vulnerable.¹⁶ This situation changed in January-February, 1950, when, at last, the Namasudra peasants in large numbers decided to leave Pakistan.

This second wave of refugee influx was occasioned by a particular incident in the Bagerhat subdivision of Khulna district in East Pakistan in December 1949. Here a police party came to a Namasudra village called Kalshira in search of a few communists and were resisted by the villagers, resulting in the death of one police constable. Two days later a large police force assisted by Ansars and other elements attacked not only this one village but also 22 other neighbouring villages inhabited by 'Hindu Namasudras.'¹⁷ The Calcutta press immediately picked it up. The fact that the victims of this incident were communists and Namasudras was lost; they all became 'Hindus.' And this media frenzy resulted in the outbreak of a fierce riot in Calcutta and Howrah – for the first time after independence – and the Muslims from West Bengal began to flee. This led to retaliatory violence in East Pakistan, where the rioting spread from Khulna to Rajshahi and Dacca, and then, to Mymensingh and Barisal districts. The main victims of these riots were not the high caste Hindu bhadrolok, as many of them had already left, but the Dalit and tribal peasants like the Namasudras and the Santhals, who were now forced to leave their homes and migrate to India.¹⁸

This was the final breakdown of the Dalit-Muslim alliance in East Pakistan as the Dalit peasants were deliberately targeted in this post-Partition upsurge of violence. At the Bongaon railway station, the first batch of Namasudra refugees of about 500 families arrived in the first week of January 1950,¹⁹ and since then, thousands of them began to arrive every day. Either they came through Bongaon and then moved on to the Sealdah station in Calcutta, from where they were despatched to various refugee camps, or they arrived at the border districts of Nadia or 24-Parganas, where they began to settle down as the local Muslims began to flee across the border. As one report suggests, in the early months of 1950, about 10,000 refugees were arriving everyday through Bongaon and settling down in Gaighata, Baduria, Habra and other places.²⁰ By the beginning of 1951, following the disturbances in Khulna, about 1.5 million refugees had arrived in West Bengal.²¹ Majority of them were Scheduled Caste peasants.

But this was not the end, as migration of Namasudra peasants continued incessantly through the following years. There was a steady trickle – about 25 to 30 a day – until the beginning of 1952. Most of them were coming by rail through either Bongaon or Banpur, and a few arrived by road. In May 1952 the number of such arrivals increased to 70 to 80 per day.²² This number began to rise dramatically from July: in July, August and September, on an average more than 6500 refugees were arriving every month, rising to more than 10 thousand in October and continuing thereafter at that pace.²³ According to official statistics, nearly 2.1 million refugees had arrived in West Bengal between 1950 and 1956. There was a lull for a few years after this, and then following the Hazratbal riot in 1964, 419,000 people migrated from East Pakistan to West Bengal.²⁴ And these official figures are not often reliable, as they account for only those who registered themselves and were eventually despatched to various refugee camps. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there were probably many more who just crossed the border and settled down in various places in the border districts of

Murshidabad, Nadia and 24-Parganas. No one knew their exact number.²⁵ By the middle of 1948 about two hundred thousand refugees had settled in the district of Nadia – half of them in the urban areas, the other half in various border regions.²⁶ This exodus and changes in the communal demographics of the district continued throughout the next decade. In October 1951, in the Basirhat subdivision of the neighbouring district of 24-Parganas, according to one report, about 200 people were entering daily from across the border on foot or by boat.²⁷ The Rajbansis who crossed the border in north Bengal settled down in the districts of Malda, Dinajpur and Cooch Behar and, in their case, it is even difficult to get any exact number.²⁸

In West Bengal, in the 1950s, the dominant popular discourse represented all these refugees as ‘minority Hindus’ fleeing from Islamic Pakistan, and the predicament of the ‘Hindu’ refugees overshadowed all other public discourses of victimhood.²⁹ But the Congress government refused to accept this migration to be permanent or legitimate and wanted the migrants to go back at an appropriate time. Nehru therefore signed the Delhi Pact with the Pakistani Premier Liaquat Ali Khan on 8 April, 1950, to ensure their safe return. But the Hindu Mahasabha launched a campaign to demand military action against Pakistan. Shyama Prasad Mukherji demanded an exchange of population as the only solution to this ‘Hindu minority’ problem and vowed not to allow the refugees to be sent back.³⁰ In West Bengal’s public space, the rhetoric of the victimhood of the ‘Hindu refugees’ seemed to have silenced all other discourses of identity at this juncture. To put it in another way, what we witness here is a dual process of ascription: an Islamic nationalism in Pakistan sought to collapse all internal boundaries within its non-Muslim Other, while the dominant Hindu discourse in West Bengal tried to appropriate everyone into a corporate Hindu identity.

But were they all ‘Hindu’ refugees fleeing from the atrocities of ‘Islamic’ nationalism? And how important was the caste factor in this story of continuous exodus? ‘About 95 per cent of the refugees are Namasudras’, reported a police intelligence report in June 1952.³¹ They were mostly cultivators or day-labourers, or belonged to various professions, like washermen, fishermen, weavers, petty businessmen and small jotdars and talukdars.³² They came from all parts of East Pakistan, but mostly from Barisal, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna, where the Namasudra peasants had been living side by side with their Muslim neighbours for a long historical period. So why did this relationship break down? Overwhelmed by the number of incoming refugees, the Police Intelligence Officers started questioning those who arrived at Sealdah or at Bongaon and Banpur railway stations. The stories they narrated were interesting and varied, and do not allow us to reconstruct a simple narrative of communal or caste conflict in rural East Pakistan. But they also make it clear that this was no ordinary ‘economic migration’, as the Government of India thought it to be.³³

Without going into the details, we can summarise here the main reasons behind this mass Dalit peasant migration in Bengal as stated by the migrants themselves.³⁴ What they all mentioned first of all was of course an economic reason: they were leaving East Pakistan because of an ‘acute economic crisis,’ particularly in the district of Khulna where, according to one report, ‘a near famine condition’ prevailed. The Namasudra refugees complained of falling prices of jute, non-availability of essential commodities like cloth, the breakdown of the rationing system and so on. The Namasudra day labourers found it difficult to get employment, as their previous employers – the caste Hindu landlords – had all left. And, in a labour surplus market, the Muslim landlords preferred their co-religionists. But the Namasudra peasants did not migrate just because of these economic reasons. They decided to leave their home and land because, at this crucial point, the serious resource crunch destroyed whatever goodwill there was between the two communities of peasants. The low level ‘routine violence’ which Haimanti Roy has observed in East Bengal since 1948-49,³⁵ was escalated manifold after 1950. The Namasudra small peasants, who owned some land, increasingly felt the

aggressive assertion of their Muslim employees and more powerful Muslim landed neighbours, who all wanted their land. And the provocations to leave were numerous, ranging from unlawful occupation of land to public humiliation of women and direct instruction to leave the country if they wanted to save their lives and honour. Complaints about atrocities against women were almost universal. However, if we go into the details, it seems to have been more verbal abuse than actual physical rape, although rape cases were reported as well. Almost everyone mentioned the rising numbers of armed robberies – or ‘dacoities’ as they called them – in their houses. In some cases the robbers parted with as little as Rupees 60 in cash and earthen utensils, but almost in all cases they harassed the women and asked them to leave the country. And then, when the local Namasudras did not feel safe in their own homes anymore, came the scare of passport. Pakistan government proposed to introduce passports from October 1952 and many Hindus thought that this would close all opportunities of moving to India in future. This panic was also systematically fanned by interested groups with an eye on the properties, and led to an avalanche of migration. Thus competition for scarce resources was possibly a potent factor behind this breakdown of Dalit-Muslim relationship in East Bengal. And, to complement it, there were rumours circulating that the Government of India was waiting to offer them a lucrative rehabilitation package, with offers of land, if they once managed to cross the border. But their decision to leave their land and home was not because of this economic lure; it was due to a pervasive sense of insecurity.

And then, the migration itself turned out to be a traumatic experience, which for many of them probably also brought a permanent rupture with their past. Those who migrated to West Bengal immediately after the riots of 1950 came with memories of horrific violence, which many of them had experienced personally.³⁶ And those who came after 1951 had to undergo the upsetting experience of train journeys, where the trains were stopped at the border checkpoints and the refugees were stripped of all their possessions. They were only allowed to take 50 rupees per head and all their belongings were taken away. So people tried to hide things, particularly valuable possessions and ornaments, and consequently were subjected to further indignities by the custom officials and border guards, with stories of physical searches of women in trains with lights switched off starting to circulate.³⁷ There are also stories of people being robbed of all their life’s savings in broad daylight while waiting in railway stations for trains.³⁸ Those who tried to cross the border on foot or by boat were also stopped at various points, searched and stripped of their belongings. Where they tried to escape, they were fired upon.³⁹ The very experience of migration was thus qualitatively so very different from anything they faced before that it created for them a permanent rupture with their past, in the sense, that most of them never wanted to go back to their homeland again, and ended up with a new identity of ‘refugee.’

Struggle for Rehabilitation

However, the ‘refugee’ was hardly a homogenous category as the experiences of the low caste post-1950 refugees were so very different from those of the early arrivals. The Namasudra peasants, who just crossed the border on foot or by boat, there was no one waiting to welcome them with a handsome rehabilitation package; they had to fend for themselves. The horrific experience of displacement obviously led to retaliatory violence on the Muslims in the border districts of West Bengal. Some of the worst cases of violence in 1950 took place in the border district of Nadia, where the Namasudra migrant peasants forced the Muslims to evacuate, resulting in an almost virtual exchange of population.⁴⁰ This spectre of violence became endemic in years to come. But if we look

at the details of what was actually happening in the border regions of Nadia and 24-Parganas in the 1950s, we will find it difficult to lump them into a simple narrative of communalism.

First of all, those who left their land behind and migrated to the other side of the border, often tried to get back at harvest time to reap the paddy from those lands, and such attempts were violently resisted by their new occupants.⁴¹ Such incidents of violent fracas between the Muslim and Namasudra peasants increased manifold after the fresh exodus of refugees after the 1950 riots, when the Namasudras coming over to Nadia often tried to force the Muslims still living there to vacate their houses and lands and migrate to Pakistan. Many of them at dead of night came back to cut the paddy from their fields and this inevitably led to violent clashes. The other complicating factor was the Namasudra refugees' need for livestock and they often ventured into the Pakistani side by crossing the river Ichhamati and tried to steal cattle, leading to a series of conflicts between the two peasant communities from across the international border. And the situation was often complicated by the intervention of the police forces of the two nation-states, zealously trying to protect and support the interests of their nationals.⁴² These conflicts thus seem to have been more for land and livestock – for survival – rather than for religion or caste.

But caste remained a factor nonetheless. These Namasudra refugees also had to contend with the locally powerful Hindu groups. There were several recorded incidents of conflict between the Namasudra refugees and the locally entrenched Goalas, who did not like the refugees disturbing the local balance of power, and often sided with the retreating Muslims. Again, when the high caste Hindu refugees, who had arranged exchanges of properties with Muslims, came to take possession of these lands, they faced violent resistance from Namasudra squatters, who had already taken hold of those lands, cultivated them and claimed their harvests.⁴³ In other words, this history of violent discord in the border lands of Nadia cannot be easily fitted into a simple narrative of Hindu-Muslim communal binary; caste had a role to play.

As we have mentioned already, Dalit refugees had a markedly different experience of resettlement. When the first wave of mainly high caste Hindu *bhadralok* refugees had arrived in West Bengal, they had their own resources and kin-group support. Many of them resettled themselves in squatter colonies in and around Calcutta, and the government after initial hesitation endorsed that mode of rehabilitation. But when the Dalit peasant refugees without any resources arrived by train in thousands at the Sealdah station after 1950, they were first despatched to various refugee camps in different districts like 24-Parganas, Nadia, Burdwan, Midnapur or Cooch Behar. In allocating space in the camps, caste and identity did play a part, despite persistent official denial. At Sealdah Station they were asked about their identity, given a registration card and sent by train to a refugee camp. It was at these registration desks that their identity as Namasudra cultivator was permanently inscribed on their cards – no matter what their real occupation or qualifications were.⁴⁴ Refugees would prefer to go to the camp where they knew they would find their relatives, village acquaintances or community members who had migrated earlier.⁴⁵ As a result, the refugee camps developed their own specific community demographics: in certain camps like Cooper's Camp, Dhubulia Camp in Nadia or Bagjola Camp in the 24-Parganas, the Namasudras constituted more than 70 per cent of the residents. In the camps they lived a shared commune life – sleeping in large living spaces with no privacy, sharing common toilets (80 for 70,000 refugees in Cooper's Camp), and standing in long queues for dole and ration. Caste officially and apparently had no place in this camp life, which sought to democratize poverty and suffering in strange ways; yet it was there all the time. Caste was certainly taken into consideration in allocating space within the camps, in the sense that the few caste Hindu refugees who came to these camps preferred to stay in separate rooms, as far as practicable.⁴⁶ This is not to suggest that some form of caste segregation was maintained in the camps; this is to indicate however

that caste mattered in governance and in everyday social relations even in extreme situations of privation, despite the currency of a levelling discourse of victimhood, appropriating all those displaced and destitute people into a new collective category called the 'refugees.'

But, within the camps, these refugees had little opportunity to agitate about caste, as the compulsions of the struggle for rehabilitation imposed on them a language of unity and protest that could bring all the residents of the camps to the same barricade lines. They were all given a cash dole and some weekly ration. They were not allowed to get out of the camps, seek jobs or interact with the local population, who remained often deeply suspicious of the refugees.⁴⁷ In this way, within the fenced compounds of the Cooper's Camp, for example, about seventy thousand refugees spent months and sometimes years in imposed idleness or just 'endlessly playing cards,'⁴⁸ earning in the process the reputation of being indolent and lacking in entrepreneurship.⁴⁹ The level of frustration was bound to increase in such a situation. Coordinated often by the emerging Bastuhara Samitis (refugee associations), their initial protests were against camp maladministration, unacceptable quality of ration or high handedness of the Camp Administrators.⁵⁰ For example, in July 1949, about two hundred Namasudras refugees of the Dudkundi Camp in Jhargram in Midnapore district, frustrated by lack of job opportunities and late payment of cash doles, vented their anger on the Nepali camp guards, who prevented them from removing doors and windows of unoccupied huts.⁵¹ Sometimes their anger spilled over into the outside communities. In Rupasri Camp in Ranaghat in Nadia, in February, 1950, when they were not getting adequate ration, they went out to the adjoining villages and demanded rice and paddy from the local Muslims threatening them to loot their stocks otherwise.⁵² When, after 1950, the Namasudra peasant refugees began to arrive in large numbers, there were targeted attempts to mobilize them. For example, Manohar Roy, who claimed himself to be a right hand man of Jogen Mandal, started a Purba Banga Bastuhara Samiti in Chandmari Camp and started mobilizing the Namasudra refugees.⁵³ Similarly, one Ramendra Kishor Mullick, who claimed to be close to P. R. Thakur, began to mobilise Namasudra refugees in Bagula and Dhubulia, asking them not to join any political party. In largely attended meetings, he discussed ways and means of rehabilitating peasant refugees who had just migrated from East Bengal.⁵⁴ But sometimes they also mobilised under non-Dalit local refugee leaders. For example, when a storm destroyed 300 huts in Cooper's Camp in April 1952, more than 200 residents of the camp, under the leadership of Jyotish Mukerjee and Bimal Biswas (a Brahmin and a Namasudra consecutively), travelled by train without ticket to Calcutta to communicate their grievances to Chief Minister and Relief Commissioner. They were arrested at Sealdah Station and sent back to Cooper's, while their leaders were prosecuted and convicted.⁵⁵ A few days later, about 800 refugees of the Dhubulia Camp squatted on the railway tracks for the whole day to ventilate their complaints against the Camp Administration.⁵⁶

But the refugees' main grievance was against the official rehabilitation policy. The government argued that there was not enough vacant land in West Bengal to rehabilitate these agriculturists. So it decided to rehabilitate them in the neighbouring provinces of Assam, Bihar and Orissa, and further off in the Andaman Islands and in early 1956 announced the Dandakaranya Scheme of rehabilitating them in a region consisting of 78,000 square miles of inhospitable unirrigated land in the tribal areas of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh.⁵⁷ They were to be forcibly transported to these regions, their camps were to be closed and if they refused to go, their doles were to be stopped.⁵⁸ From January 1950, groups of Namasudra families were being surreptitiously shipped off to Andaman Islands.⁵⁹ From 1953, there was a more explicit policy of selecting only the Namasudra peasants for resettlement in Andaman.⁶⁰ Then started the forcible transfer to other provincial camps to which the refugees protested with force. In September-October, 1950, groups in Cooper's Camp were given their despatch order by the Camp Commandant to move to Amardah

Camp in Orissa without much time to prepare for the journey. Of those who were sent forcibly, about a thousand of them came back to Howrah station within days, finding the situation there unbearable.⁶¹ But after returning to West Bengal, they were denied all assistance, as the report of a refugee meeting held in Wellington Square on 19 February 1955 clearly indicates.⁶²

Gradually these localised protest movements came under large umbrella type organisations like the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) or the Sara Bangla Bastuhara Samiti (SBBS) [All Bengal Refugee Association] and gradually they came under the shadow of the mainstream political parties, as all of them had eyes on these unending streams of refugees. On the right, the Hindu Mahasabha, Jan Sangh and the RSS criticised the government 'appeasement policy' towards Pakistan and advocated economic sanctions against Pakistan as a solution to the problems of East Bengal's Hindu minorities. On the centre, the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) started actively organising the refugees and came to dominate the SBBS,⁶³ while on the left the Communist Party of India (CPI) came to a controlling position within the UCRC by 1951. Both groups organised mass protests against the Dandakaranya scheme, as also against the threatened stoppage of cash doles and closure of the refugee camps, but they failed to collaborate. In March-April 1958, the UCRC and the SBBS organised parallel *satyagraha* campaigns lasting for about a month and resulting in the arrests of 30,000 refugees. Most of them were camp refugees and nearly 70 percent of them were Namasudras. Caste once again played a role here, as the higher caste Hindu refugees from the squatter colonies in Calcutta refused to join them. And what is equally important is that, although it started initially under a high caste leftist leadership of the UCRC and SBBS, it eventually witnessed the emergence of a Dalit refugee leadership.⁶⁴ But, given the political dominance of the mainstream political parties over the refugee movement, they could hardly hope to have any autonomy.

From around 1955, alongside the caste Hindu UCRC and SBBS leaders, we also hear the names of Ratish Mullick, Jatin Saha of the Cooper's Camp or Hemanta Biswas of Bagjola Camp, taking leadership in refugee agitations. Initially, they were working under the umbrella of the UCRC,⁶⁵ but gradually they began to lose faith in it. Amritalal Majumder (Forward Bloc) started his independent organisation despite his long association with UCRC.⁶⁶ The reasons are probably not difficult to surmise, as, for many leaders of the UCRC, the refugee movement was becoming an exercise in electoral constituency building. In the first election of 1952, the UCRC officially started enlisting support of the refugees for votes for CPI against Congress.⁶⁷ And this endeavour continued, as we find at least three reports of refugee meetings – two in Cooper's Camp in June and July and the other at a conference of the West Bengal camp refugees in Rajarhat (24-Parganas) in June 1956 – where formal resolutions were passed urging the refugees to register themselves in voter's list to exercise their franchise in favour of the leftist candidates in the next general election.⁶⁸ While registering names in the voters' list was a way to assert their right of citizenship, there was a growing suspicion that the refugee issues were probably becoming less important than the electoral calculations, as was evident in their abandoning the 1959 movement described below. But CPI was not alone; Hindu Mahasabha and its leaders like N. C. Chatterjee were also trying to tap into their refugee support base during elections.⁶⁹ But CPI's additional concern was to maintain amity between the refugees and the local peasants – their Kisan front – over the issue of forcible land occupation.⁷⁰ It was not surprising, therefore, that, at a meeting in Wellington Square on 12 April 1957, Hemanta Biswas had to appeal to all political parties not to exploit the refugees to achieve their own political goals.⁷¹ Jogendra Nath Mandal at this stage emerged as the major spokesperson for the Namasudra refugees in these camps and his leadership in some ways undercut the level of support for the leftists. But he too could not bring back the caste question to the centre stage of the Namasudra refugees' struggle for rehabilitation.

Mandal and Dalit Refugees

On 8 October, 1950, Jogendra Nath Mandal migrated to West Bengal after resigning from his ministerial position in the Pakistani central cabinet as a mark of protest against the continuing repression of Hindu minorities in East Pakistan.⁷² His long letter of resignation⁷³ makes it clear that when he left Pakistan he felt a deep sense of frustration about the breakdown of a Dalit-Muslim alliance. And soon his migrant identity was going to define his social and political marginality in West Bengal and forced him to seek new alliances.

Mandal's defection could not immediately rejuvenate the Scheduled Caste movement in West Bengal, where he found himself in more hostile grounds, as his past made him unacceptable to the political establishment. In the first election in 1952, Mandal contested in the Beniapukur-Ballygunge reserved Assembly seat in Calcutta as an independent candidate, after the Returning Officer dismissed an objection about his citizenship status.⁷⁴ But, in the election campaign, he did not project himself as a Scheduled Caste leader, and tried to represent a much broader social front incorporating both the Scheduled Castes and the refugees. The local Dalit groups organised processions in support of Mandal's candidature,⁷⁵ while he was also supported by the local refugee lawyers' association⁷⁶ and the refugee women's groups, led by caste Hindu leaders.⁷⁷ He was indeed supported by a wide cross-section of non-Congress voters in the constituency and this did not allow him to use the rhetoric of caste in this election campaign.⁷⁸ But, in the end, he lost the election to an unknown Congress candidate, as the SC vote was divided among numerous independent candidates, indicating the unorganised nature of Dalit voice in post-Partition West Bengal. The Congress did not win all the reserved seats in West Bengal Assembly in this election but the Scheduled Castes Federation got none.⁷⁹ Given the lack of organisation, the Scheduled Caste leadership in West Bengal could only operate in alliance with other mainstream political parties – not alone.

If this was a despondent situation for Scheduled Caste politics in West Bengal, the major problem that a sizeable group of them were facing in this province was that of rehabilitation. Mandal soon found among these refugees a new support base that helped him reinvent his political leadership as a refugee leader. He initially became a member of the SBBS and worked in collaboration with the UCRC, but his relationship with the latter began to deteriorate from late 1957. He was not invited to its meetings, which his Namasudra followers in places like Cooper's Camp did not like.⁸⁰ In the early months of 1958, as an SBBS leader, he began to mobilise the camp refugees in the districts of 24-Parganas, Nadia, Murshidabad, Howrah, Burdwan and Birbhum, preparing them for a civil disobedience campaign to be launched on 17 March against the Dandakaranya scheme.⁸¹ He warned the camp refugees that the leftist leaders of the UCRC did not work in their true interest; they only gave them false hope and collected huge sums of money in their name. When the 1858 campaign failed, he established a new organisation, the East India Refugee Council (EIRC), which he described as a 'non-political organisation,' truly representing the interests of the refugees.⁸² He also temporarily severed his connections with the SBBS at this stage.

At this time he also sought to introduce the caste question into the discourse of refugee rehabilitation in West Bengal. As one police report notes:

Shri Jogen Mandal has been spreading class and caste ... [hatred] openly in camps. In Bolpur and Uttartilpara camp meetings on 23rd and 24th February [1958], he openly accused caste Hindu employees and caste Hindu people for sending refugee families to Madhya Pradesh outside West Bengal. He accused Govt to make West Bengal a caste Hindu state.⁸³

The counter attack from the other refugee leaders was also sharp and virulent. The SBBS leaders at a meeting in Bagjola camp on 29 June 1958 condemned him for creating a rift among the refugees by raising the caste question.⁸⁴ Even his one-time comrade Hemanta Biswas with his followers came to disrupt his meeting at Bagjola Camp on 25 July 1958 and accused him for the partition of Bengal.⁸⁵ At a meeting at Asrafabad Transit Camp in Habra in the district of 24-Parganas in July 1958, Anil Singh of CPI condemned Mandal for establishing a separate organisation only with the Scheduled Caste refugees and appealed to him to fight a united battle for all refugees along with the UCRC. Nani Kar, also of CPI, was even more merciless. He accused Mandal of creating a division between caste Hindu and Scheduled Caste refugees and thus weakening the refugee movement. He could, therefore, be nothing but a 'dalal' (agent) of the Congress government.⁸⁶ But despite these attacks, Mandal continued to ask difficult questions. In December 1959 a few bus conductors were recruited from among the refugees in Cooper's Camp. '[H]ow many of them are from the Scheduled Castes?' Mandal asked the Camp Administrator. He did not get an answer, but for asking that question he again got the flak of the leftist leaders and was branded as 'communal'.⁸⁷ Thus, in the name of unity, the caste question seems to have been very deliberately purged from the discourse of refugee movement, although it remained as relevant as ever.

The refugees too were often in serious dilemma over the caste question, as, in the interest of their struggle, unity among all refugees seemed essential. A Police intelligence report in March 1958 showed that while 'a rift' was clearly visible among the camp refugees in Burdwan district, a delegation from Ramchandrapur, Kashipur and Nawabnagar camps went to Calcutta to meet the leaders of both the UCRC and the Jogen Mandal group 'with a view to bring amity between the two to strengthen the refugee movement.' But the leaders refused to listen, and their followers failed to reconcile their differences.⁸⁸ A refugee activist in Cooper's Camp in his recollection of those days of struggle sought to privilege a generalised refugee identity over caste: 'the namasudra or the other lower caste people participated in this movement to fulfil their demands not as lower caste community members but as refugees'.⁸⁹ At a group meeting with the former residents of the Bagjola Camp, the participants vehemently asserted that caste did not matter in their movement – they were fighting as a united front for all refugees.⁹⁰ A frequently used slogan in the refugee demonstrations of this period, '*Amra kara? Bastubara*' (Who are we? Refugees) was a powerful statement that privileged their refugee identity over their caste.⁹¹

However, the social dynamics of the refugee camps also imposed compulsions on the Namasudra refugees to eschew the caste question. We have the description of an interesting incident in Sealdah refugee camp on 5 February 1958 when the refugees protested against Mandal raising the caste issue, which they thought was detrimental to the unity of their struggle, and refused to participate in the procession he was planning to organise. So Mandal left angrily without a single person accompanying him. However, it was later revealed that five or six Namasudra refugees loyal to Mandal later surreptitiously left the camp and joined the rally at Subodh Mullick Square; their other campmates did not know. In the evening the UCRC leaders came to Sealdah camp and severely criticised Mandal for raising the caste issue.⁹² In other words, in their new existence in the refugee camps, the Namasudras felt constrained to articulate their caste identity; they all now had become refugees.

And contingency played a part as well. Given the realities of political power relations in West Bengal, the refugees knew very well that they could not fight for their rehabilitation all alone. Mandal therefore could not ultimately lead an exclusively Scheduled Caste protest or a completely apolitical movement. He had to strategically align with the other non-Congress opposition groups. While he shunned the left, he was moving more to the centre-right, like the Hindu Mahasabha, the Jan Sangh

and the PSP. In November 1958 he turned down fresh overtures from the UCRC for collaboration,⁹³ but his alliances with the SBBS, PSP, Hindu Mahasabha and the Jan Sangh continued, as he walked shoulder-to-shoulder with their Brahmin and caste Hindu leaders, like Nirmal Chatterjee (Hindu Mahasabha/Swatantra and then President of EIRC), Haripada Bharati (Jan Sangh), Suresh Banerjee (PSP), Sibnath Banerji (PSP), Mahadeb Bhattacharjee (PSP/SBBS), Dhiren Bhowmik (PSP/SBBS) and others. The PSP was a breakaway group from the Congress, while the Hindu Mahasabha was the primary instigator of the Partition campaign. While in the changed circumstances of post-Partition Bengal this caste Hindu leadership supported Mandal's cause and even some of them went to jail with him, they also exerted a moderating influence on the Dalit refugee leadership and kept them within constitutional limits. There are reports of SBBS meetings where Jogen Mandal and Hemanta Biswas argued in favour of more militant actions, but were restrained by other leaders who preferred to stick to the Gandhian mode of non-violent *satyagraha*.⁹⁴ Mandal adjusted the agenda and timetable of his campaigns in consultation with and on advice of N. C. Chatterjee.⁹⁵ And it was because of them that the Dalit leaders had to refrain from using the idioms of caste in a movement which was supposedly for all refugees.

Mandal at this stage was entirely focussed on the refugee issue and became the undisputed leader of the camp refugees. In places like Cooper's Camp in Nadia, where the residents were overwhelmingly Namasudra by caste, Mandal maintained regular contact with them, spent nights in their huts and gave inspiring speeches. As a result, as a Police Intelligence Report concluded, 'the U.C.R.C. became weak to a great extent' in this camp.⁹⁶ From late 1959 till September 1961, Mandal led a series of satyagrahas with camp refugees in Calcutta and the districts.⁹⁷ But these were not movements to assert Scheduled Caste identity or project their exclusive interests – these were movements of the refugees, who had become the new Dalit. These were movements which witnessed cross-caste mobilisation and multi-caste leaderships at both local camp level as well as provincial level. And these were organised with the support of various mainstream political parties. But this political support ultimately failed the refugees and the agitation was withdrawn in October 1961.⁹⁸ We do not exactly know why this movement was withdrawn. More than fifty years later, a group of residents of Bagiola Camp felt that their leaders had abandoned them before the goals of their movement had been achieved.⁹⁹ As after this, the government forcibly despatched many of them to Dandakaranya. By 1965, 7,500 refugee families were settled there.¹⁰⁰ Nor did Mandal's leadership of the refugee movement help him launch a new political career in West Bengal. He failed to win a single elected office and died on 5 October 1968 while conducting an election campaign.¹⁰¹ One may argue that as a result of this particular dynamics of the refugee movement in West Bengal, a large section of the Dalit lost their distinctive autonomous political voice. And then, because of their dispersal, the Namasudras lost that spatial capacity to organise a powerful protest movement. Once a geographically anchored tight-knit peasant community – providing the leadership and the main support-base for the organised SC movement in colonial Bengal – they were now dispersed across large parts of eastern and central India. It is a strange fact that a large section of the Scheduled Castes of Bengal do not any longer live in Bengal to lend their support for any powerful Dalit movement. But this is only one part of the story of the Bengal Dalit.

Thakurnagar and Reinvention of Space

While the Namasudra refugees in West Bengal after Partition lost their physical space and their spatial capacity to organise articulate protests, they were also imagining a new spiritual space where they could reinvent their identity, more in a social sense than political. And it was happening through

the initiatives of the other prominent Namasudra leader of Bengal, P. R. Thakur. His movement was hardly one of traditional Dalit political protest. It is interesting that when Jogendranath Mandal was organising agitations against the Namasudra refugees being sent off to areas outside West Bengal, Thakur was supporting the government rehabilitation policy. In 1946, he had won the election to the Bengal Legislative Assembly as an Independent candidate, but then became a member of the Constituent Assembly with Congress support. At the Constituent Assembly, he opposed reservation for the Scheduled castes, advocating instead 'drastic social reforms through legislation so that all invidious distinctions between man and man may be abolished.'¹⁰² He remained loyal to the Congress during the trying days of Partition, which he accepted after getting a solemn pledge from Gandhi and Nehru that rehabilitation of the Scheduled Castes would be taken care of if they had to migrate from East Pakistan.¹⁰³ He himself migrated soon after Partition and, for some time, remained outside organised politics, as he lost, like other political leaders from east Bengal, his electoral constituency. At this stage of his political career, he also devoted his time to the cause of the refugees, but his ways were very different from those of Mandal.

In December 1947, he bought a piece of land in north 24-Parganas between Chandpara and Gobordanga and started the Thakur Land Industries Ltd, with himself as the Chair of the seven-member Board of Directors. This was the beginning of Thakurnagar, the first Dalit refugee colony in India started by an independent Dalit initiative. It was a small hamlet near the Indo-Pakistan border, about 63 kilometres away from Calcutta. Within the next ten years around this place, in lands reclaimed from the marshy tracts, more than 50 thousand Dalit refugees settled down. In 1951 Thakur received a government grant of Rs.80,000 to develop the infrastructure of the colony, including roads and supply of drinking water, and each family received Rs. 200 and two bundles of corrugated iron for building houses.¹⁰⁴ Many of the Namasudra peasants who migrated after 1950 – and continued to migrate thereafter – settled in the two border districts of North 24-Parganas and Nadia¹⁰⁵ where more than half of the Namasudra population in West Bengal now live. Thakurnagar grew into a major cultural centre for these Dalit refugees.

However, the main reason for this was not Thakur's politics, but his role as the Guru of the Matua Mahasangha (MM), a Vaishnava religious sect which his great grandfather Harichand Thakur had founded in the late nineteenth century and grandfather Guruchand Thakur had organised in the early twentieth. It was through this religious movement that Namasudra social protest had first started and Scheduled Caste politics had been organised in East Bengal in the early twentieth century.¹⁰⁶ By the early 1930s, Pramatha Ranjan had taken over as the head of the Mahasangha, which was registered in 1943. After Partition, it functioned from two centres – the East Bengal chapter operated from its original hub in village Orakandi in Faridpur, while Thakurnagar became the cultural centre of the Matua devotees who had migrated after 1950.¹⁰⁷ In this period, when large scale Dalit migration started, he began to visit the camps, not so much to organise agitations, but in his role as the spiritual leader of the MM which many of these refugees were affiliated to.¹⁰⁸ By the early 1960s, he was widely recognised as the hereditary guru of the MM, the followers of which were concentrated in the two border districts of 24-Parganas and Nadia.¹⁰⁹

However, Thakur also remained active in refugee movements. In January 1949 a Police report noted that Thakur was 'taking a leading part in fomenting troubles. The plan so far evolved by Thakur and his supporters ... [was] to start a campaign of satyagraha in the form of hunger strike at the camps ... with a view to mobilising public opinion behind their demands relating to relief and rehabilitation...'¹¹⁰ The Nikhil Banga Bastuhara Mahasammelan (All Bengal Refugee Convention) in Naihati on 2 January 1949 advertised his name as one of the star speakers.¹¹¹ On 21 November 1950, he chaired a mammoth meeting in Gaighata attended by about 15000 refugees.¹¹² He became

associated with Relief Committees for East Bengal refugees.¹¹³ But, at the same time, he remained steadfast in his loyalty to Congress and, in the 1950s and the 1960s, was preoccupied with building his political constituency in and around Thakurnagar. He was elected on a Congress ticket to the West Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1957 (from Haringhata SC reserved seat) and 1962 (from Hanskhali SC reserved seat); in the latter year, he also became a Minister of State for Tribal Development.

As a Congress leader, Thakur was encouraging Namasudra refugees to settle down in other parts of India where they could get land to resettle. In the Legislative Assembly, he, on the one hand, pronounced loudly his loyalty to Congress: 'It is my Congress. With all its faults I love it.' Addressing the Congress, he said, 'whatever you have done is enough.'¹¹⁴ On the other hand, he expressed his faith in the effectiveness of the government rehabilitation plans. The Namasudra pioneer cultivators had in the past reclaimed the *bil* tracts of east Bengal and the forest lands of the Sunderbans, he argued. So if they could get vacant land they could build a new Bengal in Dandakaranya or Andaman Island. According to one report, he personally visited refugee camps and persuaded the Dalit refugees to move to Andaman.¹¹⁵ When the anti-Dandakaranya movement started in 1858, he criticised the communists for misguiding and manipulating the refugees for political reasons, and often forcing them not to go to Dandakaranya against their best interests.¹¹⁶ In other words, he was part of the story of the geographical dispersal of the community, which the Congress government of the time is blamed for. His political support for the Dandakaranya Scheme did not endear him to the camp refugees, but there was space for ambivalence and ambiguity. In a group meeting with the Bagjola camp refugees, one of them proudly declared that 95 per cent of the residents of their camp were Matuas, yet they did not like Thakur's support for the Dandakaranya scheme – thus making a clear distinction between the political leader and the guru.¹¹⁷

But the point of departure for Thakur came in 1964, when he felt that the solemn pledge he had received from Gandhi and Nehru about the rehabilitation of Scheduled Caste refugees had been broken. In this year, Prophet Muhammad's sacred relics were reported as stolen from the Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar in Kashmir. In retaliation, riots broke out in Khulna from 4 January, spreading to Jessore the next day and panic-stricken refugees began to arrive in Sealdah Station by Down Barisal Express, with harrowing tales of atrocities.¹¹⁸ In all, in 1964 more than 400 thousand Dalit peasants crossed the border as refugees in West Bengal.¹¹⁹ This fresh influx and the horror stories of riots in East Pakistan heated up the atmosphere in West Bengal too – particularly in the border districts of 24-Parganas and Nadia, as well as in Calcutta, where full scale anti-Muslim riots started from 10 January. As a precautionary measure, dawn-to-dusk curfew was clamped on Namasudra majority areas like Bongaon town and Habra in 24-Parganas and Dhubulia Camp, Taherpur Colony and Cooper's Camp in Ranaghat in Nadia. As a precautionary preventive measure, the District Magistrate of Nadia stopped cash doles of those who were arrested in connection with the disturbances.¹²⁰ When repressive measures of the police specifically targeted the Namasudra refugees, Thakur resigned from the Assembly on 6 March 1964 as a mark of protest against the inaction of the Congress government against attacks on refugees in Bongaon. He then participated in a series of meetings with the opposition leaders demanding proper rehabilitation of the Namasudra refugees in the border districts of West Bengal.¹²¹ At this stage, he allegedly was also supporting the activities of the Save Pakistan Minorities Committee which was proposing an economic blockade of East Pakistan.¹²²

At a meeting in Habra on 28 March Thakur, for the first time, publicly blamed Prime Minister Nehru for renegeing on his pledge to protect the minorities in East Pakistan – the promise he had given to Thakur at the time of Partition. He addressed many other public meetings in the border

areas critiquing government refugee policies and condemning police atrocities in Habra and Bongaon areas, referring to a particular incident involving harrasment of a Namasudra girl.¹²³ On charges of inciting public disturbances, the West Bengal Government arrested him on 19 April under the Defence of India Rules; a few days later on 30 April, Jogendranath Mandal was arrested too under the same rules.¹²⁴ And both were kept incarcerated in Dum Dum Central Jail until 3 June.¹²⁵ Did the divergent paths of the two rival leaders of the Bengal Scheduled Caste movement finally converge in a jail of free India? We do not really know for certain, although it was definitely the final parting of ways between the Congress and P. R. Thakur. His son Kapil Krishna claims in an article that, in 1964, in an Assembly by-election in Hanskhali constituency, his father had supported Mandal against the Congress candidate.¹²⁶ A close confidante of Mandal, who worked for him during the election campaign, also confirms that Thakur wrote postcards to his followers to vote for Mandal.¹²⁷ But despite that support, Mandal did not win this election. In 1967 Thakur contested the election as a candidate of the breakaway Bangla Congress in the Lok Sabha constituency of Nabadwip and won by 89 thousand votes in a direct contest against his Congress rival.¹²⁸ But this was the last election he won; in the two subsequent parliamentary elections in 1971 and 1977, he lost to the CPI(M) candidate, indicating a decisive left takeover of the refugee- and Scheduled-Caste constituencies, both merging into a leftist vote bank that remained intact until 2009. But that's a different story.

Thakur's significance in the post-Partition history of the Namasudras was not because of his politics. When he was arrested in 1964, he was described in a police report as a leader with 'considerable influence upon the refugees of East Pakistan particularly upon the Namasudra community'.¹²⁹ But this 'influence' was not of a political kind, as all those who protested against his arrest, participated in hunger strikes and sent petitions for his release, described him as a religious guru, as the Mahasanghadhipati of the MM, whose incarceration had seriously jeopardized the religious activities of the sect.¹³⁰ In other words, his influence was not because of his politics, but was based more on his hereditary role as the guru of the sect, which he not only kept alive but expanded after the 1950s.

Thakur was aware of the need to unite a community that had lost their physical space and were now dispersed across the subcontinent. He was never a great supporter of the reservation policies, as we have already noted. Gradually he was realising further that such policies were not serving the masses of the SC population, as only 'a few families monopolised' its fruits.¹³¹ So they needed organisation and self-help. Hence, he started visiting Dalit refugee camps and colonies, not only in West Bengal, but also in Andaman and Madhya Pradesh. In 1986 he had the MM formally registered in West Bengal as a socio-religious organisation to preach the messages of Harchand and Guruchand.¹³² It was devoted to mobilise the dispersed Namasudra community and to convert Thakurnagar into a new cultural and spiritual hub for a Namasudra renaissance, reminiscent of the olden glorious days of Orakandi. After his death in 1990, his son Kapil Krishna established a centre at village Ashti in the district of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra. This centre was intended to mobilise the Namasudra refugees who settled down in central and south India in the 1960s.¹³³ In 2008, the MM had 6755 branches all over India.¹³⁴ In 2010, it claimed to have nearly 50 million members, belonging to 100 to 120 thousand families.¹³⁵ On the occasion of *baruni mela* – the major festival of the sect – lakhs of devotees from all over India visit Thakurnagar in their annual pilgrimage. The reinvented MM thus seems to have offered a new imagined space to a geographically dispersed and socially divided community, trying again to recover their collective self in post-Partition India. The political implications of this social mobilization became amply clear to all mainstream political parties in West Bengal by 2009.

The leadership of this reinvented MM comes from an upwardly mobile ambitious Namasudra middle class. The members of the community who have stayed in West Bengal have done remarkably well since the 1980s. The census of 2001 recorded the literacy rate among the Namasudras in West Bengal to be 71.93 per cent – ahead of the provincial average of 68.64 per cent. In terms of their occupational structure, 21.4 per cent were landowning peasants, 16.9 per cent were agricultural labourers, and 61.7 per cent were involved in various other professions.¹³⁶ And the matrimonial advertisements in their community website ‘Namasudra.com’ clearly indicate that many of them are indeed well placed in various white-collar occupations.¹³⁷ But despite their educational and social progress, the Namasudra middle class has remained politically marginal in a province where political power even today is monopolised by a high caste Hindu bhadrak elite.¹³⁸ Therefore, conscious of their strength of numbers in a democratic polity, the leadership of the MM since 2009 have sought their political empowerment through clever negotiations with the mainstream political parties, like Trinamul Congress and the CPI(M). But while doing so, they have not projected an exclusive Scheduled Caste agenda, but emphasized the more universalist anti-caste approach of Guruchand Thakur. In that sense, while the MM remains predominantly Scheduled Caste in its membership, it is not a Scheduled Caste movement in a conventional Ambedkarite sense.¹³⁹

Conclusion

Conventional histories of Dalit movements in India have hardly looked into the importance of space. In Bengal, for both Namasudras and Rajbansis, their close geographical location gave them that crucial spatial capacity for social mobilization. The loss of that space and subsequent dispersal were major reasons for the decline of the Namasudra movement. The Rajbansis comparatively were less dispersed, as parts of their traditional habitat remained in West Bengal, where many of them settled eventually. And this gave them that capacity to mobilize once again for a more specific demand for an autonomous ethnic space in the form of Kamtapur. The dynamics of that movement remains outside this short essay. But the point that can perhaps be made is that because of this historic shift in the life trajectories of these two large Dalit communities, the organised Scheduled Caste movements declined in strength in post-Partition West Bengal.

But then the Dalit in Bengal has never been a homogenous community and the Partition enhanced their internal divisions. The bone of contention was the question of alliance with the Muslim League. While the Federation and its leader Jogen Mandal thought that such an alliance was in the best interests of the Dalit, others like Thakur dreaded its consequences and lent their support to the Congress-Mahasabha campaign for partitioning Bengal. But Partition in the long run helped neither group, especially not the peasants, who were ultimately uprooted from their land and habitat. The experience of migration and the camp life turned them into refugees, with a different kind of struggle at hand – the struggle for resettlement. As their leaders got embroiled in that struggle, the caste issue receded to the background. The specific dynamics and the left-liberal ideologies of the refugee movement worked to suppress the caste question, as the refugees became the new Dalit in West Bengal’s social and political life.

But this refugee movement also had a fragmented history, as the two leaders Mandal and Thakur represented two different approaches to the issue of resettlement. Mandal wanted to reclaim physical space in West Bengal and was prepared to lay his life in battle for that. Thakur on the other hand was accommodating and preferred negotiation and self-help in matters of resettlement. In the end, frustrated by the insensitivities of the Congress government, he devoted his energies to invent a spiritual space in the form of MM where a dispersed Namasudra community could eventually unite

and reinvent their collective self. The struggle for physical space almost died with Mandal, in the face of stiff opposition of a Congress government and the apathy of the Hindu Bengali society, which wanted to get rid of these unwanted refugee cultivators, who were dispersed across the country. But the quest for spiritual space continued as it avoided confrontation and sustained itself behind the glare of public attention and political limelight. However, as a result of this chequered historic trajectory of the Namasudra community – the main powerhouse behind organised Scheduled Caste movement in the colonial period – that movement was significantly weakened in post-Partition West Bengal.

This is not to deny that caste Hindu political elite in West Bengal sought to dominate public space and monopolise political power, and they preferred to see an internally homogenised nation. They did so everywhere in India. But articulation of protest against that has been more powerful in some parts of the country than in others. It is this difference that needs historical explanation. But there are hazards in offering a single-factor analysis; we do not claim that Partition was the only reason for the disappearance of the SC movement in postcolonial West Bengal.

Notes

¹In 2004, it was widely reported in Calcutta newspapers that, in a number of districts, parents of higher castes objected to their children eating cooked meals in schools prepared by volunteers from the Scheduled Castes. *Anandabazar Patrika*, 24 September, 28, 29, 30 December, 2004.

²A broader discussion of this question has been provided in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Does caste matter in Bengal? Examining the myth of Bengali exceptionalism' in Mridula Nath Chakraborty, ed. *Being Bengali: at home and in the world*, London: Routledge, forthcoming.

³This community has been studied in detail in Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2003.

⁴This community has been studied in detail in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, Second edition, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁵'Extract from File 1164-44 Genl.' and 'S.S.1', GB, IB Records, F. No. 191/46, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata [hereafter WBSA].

⁶See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, New Delhi: Sage, 2004, for details.

⁷Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics 1919-47*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 258.

⁸See 'Report of the Bengal Boundary Commission', Government of India, Reforms Office, File No. 68/47-R, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

⁹Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'The East Bengal Refugees: A Lesson in Survival', in *Calcutta: The Living City*, Vol. 2, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri, Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 72; Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp.111-19; Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, 'The riddles of Partition: Memories of the Bengali Hindus', in R. Samaddar (ed.), *Reflections on the Partition in the east*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, pp. 66-69.

¹⁰The Statesman, 5 November 1946, cited in Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *Mahapran Jogendranath o Babasabeb Ambedkar*, Kolkata, Biswas Publisher, 1999, p. 112.

¹¹*Anandabazar Patrika*, 1 January 1948.

¹²Masayuki Usuda, 'Pushed towards the Partition: Jogendra Nath Mandal and the Constrained Namasudra Movement', in H.Kotani (ed.) *Caste system, Untouchability and the Depressed*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1997, pp. 221-74.

¹³One might argue that this was a continuation of colonial governmentality, which classified all Indians in terms of their religious identities in the 1940s. At the time of 1946 Calcutta riots, for example, dead bodies were

classified as 'Hindu' or Muslim' – the Hindu bodies were to be cremated and Muslim bodies buried. No other distinction of caste or class mattered.

¹⁴ A.H.A.Kamal, 'Peasant Rebellions and the Muslim League Government in East Bengal, 1947-54', in *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition*, eds. D. Chakrabarty, R. Majumdar and A. Sartori, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2007, pp. 203-4, 217.

¹⁵ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 12 February 1949.

¹⁶ These interlocking webs of mutual vulnerabilities were pithily expressed in a folk poem of East Bengal from around this time:

Gandhi morlo guli khaia

Jinnah adhmora

Barno Hindu polaia gelo

Charal porlem dbora.

[Gandhi has been killed by a bullet, Jinnah is half-dead, the caste Hindus have fled, we the Charals (low castes) have been trapped here.]

We are indebted to Anwesha Sengupta for supplying this poem used in a Bangladeshi film *Ontorjatra* (Director: Tareque and Catherine Masud; Maasranga Production).

¹⁷ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 February 1950.

¹⁸ For details on these riots, see , S. Biswas and H. Sato, *Religion and Politics in Bangladesh and West Bengal, A Study of Communal Relations*, Joint Research Programme Series No.99, Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economics, 1993, pp. 34-44.

¹⁹ *The Statesman*, 21 January 1950.

²⁰ Report on refugee situation for week ending 5/2/50, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1838/48, Part III, WBSA.

²¹ Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, p.112, Table 3.1.

²² 'Report regarding influx of East Bengal refugees at Sealdah R/S dated 3/6/52, IB Records, File No. 982/48-Sealdah, WBSA.

²³ 'Report on the exodus of Hindus from East Pakistan, dated 8.10.52, IB Records, File No. 982-48, WBSA.

²⁴ Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, p. 112, Table 3.1.

²⁵ See for example, the letter from the refugees of Murshidabad to S.P.Mukherji, dated 3/5/50, S.P.Mukherji Papers, Sub files, No.34, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi [hereafter NMML].

²⁶ See, Extract from W.C.R. of Hanskhali P.S. for the week ending 6.9.49; Copy of a report of a A.S.I. of Police of Banpur B.O.P., 24.8.49, GB, IB Records, F. No. 1238-47 (Nadia), WBSA.

²⁷ Report regarding the exodus of Hindus from Pakistan to Indian Union through Basirhat subdivision border, 24-Parganas, dated 30/10/51, GB, IB Records, F. No. 982/48, WBSA.

²⁸ Note dates 28/10/51, GB, IB Records, F. No. 982/48, WBSA. Also see Rup Kumar Barman, *Partition of India and Its Impact on the Scheduled Caste of Bengal*, Kolkata: Abhijeet Publications, 2012. For district-wise distribution of Scheduled caste population in West Bengal please see Abhijit Dasgupta, 'Unwanted harijans: partition and the Displacement of Scheduled caste in Bengal' in Imtiaz Ahmed, Abhijit Dasgupta and Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff (eds), *State, Society and Displaced People in South Asia*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2004, pp. 53-77.

²⁹ See for example, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 30 December 1949, 6 February 1950.

³⁰ 'Brief History of Sri Ashutosh Lahiry'; also, 'History sheet of Shri Ashutosh Lahiry', GB, IB Records, S.No. 45/1920, F.No. 210/20, WBSA; see also the intelligence report on Ashutosh Lahiry in IB Records, S.No.158/20, F.No. 210/20, WBSA; FR No.9 for period ending 4 May 1950, IOR: L/P&J/5/320, IOR; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 27 April 1950; *The Statesman*, 2, 8, 10 August 1950.

³¹ 'Report regarding influx of East Bengal refugees at Sealdah R/S dated 3/6/52, GB, IB Records, File No. 982/48-Sealdah, WBSA.

³² 'Report regarding influx of East Bengal refugees at Sealdah R/S dated 3/6/52, GB, IB Records, File No. 982/48-Sealdah, WBSA.

- ³³Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947-1965*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 185-95.
- ³⁴ However, one should keep in mind that we get these statements through the mediation of the Police Intelligence Officers. The following description is based on numerous reports in two GB, IB Records Files, Nos. 982/48 and 982/48-Sealdah, WBSA.
- ³⁵Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives*, pp. 147-76.
- ³⁶ For a retelling of these memories, see Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Nostalgia of "Desh"', *Memories of Partition*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 December 2004, pp. 5653-5660.
- ³⁷ Note dated 15/10/52; 'Statement of Sri Sarat Kumar Halder', IB Records File No. 982/48, WBSA.
- ³⁸ Interview with Hemendranath Biswas [name changed], 20/6/13.
- ³⁹ From Deputy Director, S.I.B., Calcutta, to Deputy Director (A), Intelligence Bureau, GOI, dated 29 October 1952, GB, IB Records File No. 982/48, WBSA.
- ⁴⁰ See for details, J. Chatterji, 'Of Graveyards and Ghettos: Muslims in Partitioned West Bengal 1947-67', in M. Hasan and A. Roy (eds.), *Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 228-29. For evidence of widespread anti-Muslim attitudes in Nadia in 1950, also see, W. van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem Press, 2005, p. 99.
- ⁴¹ See, Extract from W.C.R. of Hanskhali P.S. for the week ending 6.9.49; Copy of a report of a A.S.I. of Police of Banpur B.O.P., 24.8.49, GB, IB Records, F. No. 1238-47 (Nadia), WBSA.
- ⁴² Series of reports on such incidents can be seen in GB, IB Records, File Nos. 1238-47 (Nadia), 1809-48 (Nadia) and 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.
- ⁴³ See *ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ It is reported that the registration desks issued three coloured cards – white coloured cards for those, who wanted to take shelter in the camps; red coloured cards for those, who were able to take care of themselves and were not willing to go to the camps; and blue coloured cards for those, who only needed initial assistance for their travel before their own rehabilitation on the other side of the border, *Jugantar* 26 and 27 March 1950. Under the circumstances it was quite expected that a person with a Namasudra name would invariably be classified as 'cultivator' and was sent to the camp as he/she did not have means for his/her survival. One Namasudra graduate schoolteacher narrated the story of how he was classified as 'cultivator' despite his vehement protestation. Interview with Hemendra Nath Biswas [name changed], 20/6/2013.
- ⁴⁵ Interview with Mahesh Mahato [name changed] on 18/3/2013. Also see, Extract from W.C.R. of the Supdt of Police, Murshidabad for the week ending 30th July 1949, GB, IB Records, F.No 1809/48 (Midnapore), WBSA.
- ⁴⁶ Interview with ladies camp inmates, Cooper's Camp, on 8/2/2013.
- ⁴⁷ Interview with Mahesh Mahato [name changed] on 18/3/2013.
- ⁴⁸ Interview with Amit Mukherjee [name changed] on 18/3/2013.
- ⁴⁹ For this stereotype of lazy Bengali refugees, see Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives*, pp. 198-200.
- ⁵⁰ Interview with Amit Mukherjee [name changed] on 18/3/2013.
- ⁵¹ Report week ending 12/6/49 and 10/7/49, IB Records, File No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.
- ⁵² Report on the refugee situation for week ending 5/2/50, File No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.
- ⁵³ Report on the refugee situation for the week ending 19/11/50, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1838/48, Part III, WBSA.
- ⁵⁴ Report on the refugee situation for the week ending 19/2/50, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1838/48, Part III; Copy of a report of a D.I.O of Nadia District, dated 3/7/50, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1809-48, Nadia, WBSA.
- ⁵⁵ Confidential report of 4.4.52 regarding the arrival of the refugees of Ranaghat Cooper's Camp, at Sealdah Railway Station on 3.4.52', GB, IB Records, F.No. 982/48-Sealdah, WBSA.
- ⁵⁶ Confidential report of Sealdah Railway station, dated 8/5/52, GB, IB Records, F.No. 982/48-Sealdah, WBSA.
- ⁵⁷ The Dandakaranya scheme has undergone threadbare analysis by a number of scholars; so we are not getting into that again.

- ⁵⁸*The Statesman*, 23 August, 26 September 1950; G. Kudaisya, 'The Demographic Upheaval of Partition: Refugees and Agricultural Resettlement in India, 1947-67', *South Asia*, vol. XVIII, Special Issue, (1995), pp. 73-94; Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition*, pp. 127-41
- ⁵⁹ Report on the refugee situation for the week ending 22/1/50, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1838/48, Part III, WBSA.
- ⁶⁰ Kapil Krishna Thakur, 'Dalits of East Bengal: Before and After the Partition', in B. Chatterjee and D. Chatterjee (eds.), *Dalit Lives and Dalit Visions in Eastern India*, Kolkata: Centre for Rural Resources, 2007, p.33.
- ⁶¹ Report on the refugee situation for the week ending 1/10/50, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1838/48, Part III, WBSA.
- ⁶² WBPA dated 19/2/55, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1483/32, WBSA.
- ⁶³ Annual Administration Report 1953, GB, IB Records, F.No. 32/28, Serial No. 220/1928, WBSA.
- ⁶⁴ For details, see Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta: NayaUdyog, 1999, pp.177-81; T.Y. Tan and G. Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 152-53.
- ⁶⁵WBPA, dated 19/1/55, 19/2/55, 19/3/55, 2/4/55, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1483/32, WBSA.
- ⁶⁶Jagadish ChandraMandal, *MahapranJogendranath*, vol. 6,Kolkata: ChaturthaDunya, 2003, p.50.
- ⁶⁷Babul Kumar Pal, *Barisal theke Dandakaranya: Purbabanger Krishjibi udbastur punarbashaner itibas*, Kolkata: Mitram, 2010, pp. 77-78.
- ⁶⁸ WBPA, dated 7/7/56, 14/7/56, 4/8/56, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1483/32, WBSA.
- ⁶⁹Addendum to the dossier of N.C.Chatterjee (Ex-MP) (written from 1.1.62 to 31.12.63', GB, IB Records, F.No. 238/42(1), Part III, WBSA.
- ⁷⁰ This was quite evident during the Bagjola Camp squatting incident in July 1959. See, 'Copy of an IB Officer's Report dated 5/7/59', GB, IB Records, S.No. 288/46, 820/46, WBSA.F.No.
- ⁷¹ Extract from S.B.D.N, dated 15/4/57, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1483/32, WBSA.
- ⁷²*The Statesman*, 9 October 1950.
- ⁷³ The letter is reproduced in Tathagata Roy, *A Suppressed Chapter in History: The Exodus of Hindus from East Pakistan and Bangladesh 1947-2006*, New Delhi: Bookwell, 2007, Appendix B, pp. 469-92.
- ⁷⁴*The Statesman*, 20, 21, 22 November 1951.
- ⁷⁵*Jugantar*, 19 January 1952
- ⁷⁶ *Jugantar*, 21 January 1952.
- ⁷⁷*Jugantar*, 8 January 1952
- ⁷⁸See for details, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: Meanings of Freedom in Post-independence West Bengal, 1947-1952*, London: Routledge, pp. 164-65.
- ⁷⁹ The CPI won three of those seats, Forward Bloc (Marxist) won two, Krishak Mazdoor Praja Party got two, Jan Sangh one and the rest went to the Congress. *Jugantar*, 3, 13 February 1952.
- ⁸⁰ Copy of an IB Officer's observation report of 4th Annual Conference of the UCRC, dated 8/12/57, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1483/32, WBSA.
- ⁸¹ Extract from the Report in connection with the disturbances created by the refugees in Vishnupur Court on 18.3.58, GB, IB Records, F. No. 1483/32 (P.F.), WBSA.
- ⁸² Report of a D.I.B. officer dated 25.2.58; Copy of Report of a D.I.O dated 26.7.58; GB, IB Records, F. No. 1483/32(P.F.), WBSA.
- ⁸³ Copy of I.B.Officer's report dated 15/3/58, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1483/32, WBSA.
- ⁸⁴Copy of a report of a D.I.O. dated 1/7/58', GB, IB Records, F.No. 820/46, WBSA.
- ⁸⁵Copy of Memo No. 7302/57-58, dt.30.7.58 from Addl S.P., D.I.B, 24-Parganas to the Spl. Supdt.of Police, III, I.B., C.I.D., west Bengal, GB, IB Records, S. No. 50/30, F.No. 64/30, WBSA.
- ⁸⁶ Copy of Memo No.7008/57-58 from Additional Supdt of Police, 24-Parganas to S.S.,I.B.,C.I.D., West Bengal, Calcutta, GB, IB Records, F.No. 88-39(1) P.F., WBSA.
- ⁸⁷ Copy forward under No.5/19-59(1), dated 2/1/50 from Supdt of Police, D.I.B., Nadia to S.S., I.B., C.I.D., West Bengal, Calcutta, GB, IB Records, F.No. 998/44, WBSA.

- ⁸⁸Copy of No. 896(7)/120-48 dated 14.3.58 from Supdt. of Police, D.I.B., Burdwan to S.S., I.B., C.I.D., West Bengal, Calcutta, GB, IB Records, F.N. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.
- ⁸⁹Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, 'Politics of Rehabilitation in Struggle of the Lower Caste Refugees in West Bengal', *Voice of Dalit*, Vol.3, No.1, Jan-June, 2010, p. 72.
- ⁹⁰Group meeting with Bagjola Camp residents on 22/6/13.
- ⁹¹Ext. from an IB Officer's Report, dated 24.3.58, GB, IB Records, Serial No. F. No. 96-49, Part II, WBSA.
- ⁹²Copy of secret report no. nil dated 6.2.58 from R.I.O Sealdah; Copy of I.B.Officer's report dated 6.2.58, GB, IB Records, S. No. 288/46, F. No. 820/46, WBSA.
- ⁹³'Agitation by the Refugees' the continuation of the Report dated 14/11/58, GB, IB Records, F. No. 96-49, WBSA.
- ⁹⁴See for example, 'File No. 1808-58(24-Pargs), Page 49. Meeting report'; 'Report of a secret source dt. 17.3.50 regarding Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan (PSP) – forwarded from DC, SB, Calcutta under Memo No. 5765(4)/PM553/58', GB, IB Records, F. No. 96-49, WBSA.
- ⁹⁵Intercepted letter from Jogendra Nath Mandal to N.C.Chatterjee, dated 3/12/58, GB, IB Records, F. No. 238/42, Part II; 'Addendum to the dossier of N.C.Chatterjee, Ex-MP', GB, IB Records, F.No. 238/42(1), Part III, WBSA.
- ⁹⁶Report on Cooper's Camp affairs (submitted by a D.I.O on 1.12.59), GB, IB Records, F. No. 303/39, WBSA.
- ⁹⁷For details see, Bandyopadhyay, 'Postscript', in *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 259-60.
- ⁹⁸Group meeting with Bagjola Camp residents on 26/6/13.
- ⁹⁹Group meeting with Bagjola Camp residents on 22/6/13.
- ¹⁰⁰Tan and Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition*, p.151.
- ¹⁰¹See Dwaipayan Sen, 'A politics subsumed: the life and times of Jogendranath Mandal, *Himal South Asian*, April 2010, http://www.himalmag.com/A-politics-subsumed_nw4416.html, accessed on 3/04/2010.
- ¹⁰²Harijan Sevak Sangh, Monthly Letter for August 1947, dated 1 September 1947, F.No. G-19 (K.W.1), 1946-48, AICC Papers, 1st Instalment, Part II, NMMML.
- ¹⁰³Kapil Krishna Thakur, 'Dalits of East Bengal', pp. 31.
- ¹⁰⁴Manosanto Biswas, 'Banglar Namasudra andolone Pramatha Ranjan Thakurer bhumika', in M. Chattopadhyay (ed), *Itihas Anusandhan 26*, Kolkata: Paschimbanga Itihas Samsad, 2012, p. 516; also see West Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings [hereafter WBLAP], Vol.20, No.1, June-August 1958, pp. 64-65.
- ¹⁰⁵For more discussion on Namasudra refugees who settled in Nadia, see Tetsuya Nakatani, 'Partition Refugees on Borders: Assimilation in West Bengal', in A.Dasgupta, M. Togawa, and A.Barkat (eds), *Minorities and the State: Changing Social and Political Landscape of Bengal* (New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2011), pp. 66-87.
- ¹⁰⁶For details, see Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, protest and identity*, chapter 2.
- ¹⁰⁷Manosanto Biswas, 'Banglar Namasudra andolone Pramatha Ranjan Thakurer bhumika', p.518.
- ¹⁰⁸Interview with Amit Mukherjee [name changed] on 18/3/2013.
- ¹⁰⁹See petitions from Matua Mahasngha devotees in gb, IB Records, F.No. 2076-50, WBSA.
- ¹¹⁰Extract from C.T.S (10) dated 11.1.49, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1809/48 (Main), WBSA.
- ¹¹¹'Nikhil Banga Bastuhara Mahasammelan' pamphlet, gb, IB Records, F.No. 1483/32, WBSA.
- ¹¹²Report on refuge situation for week ending 10/12/50, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1838-48, Part III, WBSA.
- ¹¹³Abstract dt. 29.4.50, GB, IB Records, F.No. 1809-48 (Malda), WBSA.
- ¹¹⁴WBLAP, Vol. 23, 28 September 1959, p.282.
- ¹¹⁵Manosanto Biswas, 'Banglar Namasudra andolone Pramatha Ranjan Thakurer bhumika', p.517.
- ¹¹⁶WBLAP, Vol.17, No.3, 5 July 1957, pp.208-09; Vol.21, 2 January 1959, pp. 598-600.
- ¹¹⁷Group meeting with Bagjola Camp residents on 26/6/13.
- ¹¹⁸*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 5,6,7 January 1964.
- ¹¹⁹According to Joya Chatterji, the exact number was 419,000. See *The Spoils of Partition*, p. 112.
- ¹²⁰*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 10, 11, 16 January 1964.

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- ¹²¹ GB, IB Records, F. No. 29/26, Page No. 232-231; Copy of meeting report dated 28.3.64, F. No. 353/24, WBSA.
- ¹²² A note on Shri Pramatha Ranjan Thakur... of Thakur Colony, P.S.Gaighata, 24-Parganas', GB, IB Records, F.No. 2076-50, WBSA.
- ¹²³ Ibid.
- ¹²⁴ Note sheet, dated 22/5/64, GB, IB Records, F.No. 2076-50, WBSA. Also see *Jugantar*, 20 April and 1 May 1964.
- ¹²⁵ From Deputy Inspector General of Police, I.B., West Bengal to Deputy Secretary, Home (Spl) Dept., 5 June 1964, GB, IB Records, F.No. 2076-50, WBSA.
- ¹²⁶ Kapil Krishna Thakur, 'Dalits of East Bengal', p. 31.
- ¹²⁷ Interview with Hemendranah Biswas [name changed], 20/6/13.
- ¹²⁸ Election Commission of India, Key Highlights of the General Election of 1957 to the Legislative Assembly of West Bengal, p. 9; Election Commission of India, Key Highlights of the General Election of 1962 to the Legislative Assembly of West Bengal, p.5; IBN Politics.com: <http://ibnlive.in.com/politics/electionstats/constituency/1967/> accessed on 18/04/2010; 'Matua Mahasanghatipati Sri Sri Pramatha Ranjan Thakur-er Sankshipta Jibanpanjee', *Matua Mahasangha Patrika*, No.62, 2 November 2009, p. 5.
- ¹²⁹ 'A note on Shri Pramatha Ranjan Thakur... of Thakur Colony, P.S.Gaighata, 24-Parganas, GB, IB Records, F.No. 2076-50, WBSA.
- ¹³⁰ See several petitions in GB, IB Records, F.No. 2076-50, WBSA.
- ¹³¹ WBLAP, Vol 17, No.1, June-July 1957, pp. 300-01.
- ¹³² 'Matua Mahasangher 23tama Barshik Sammelan, Kendriya Karya-nirbabee committeer pakshe Sadbaran Sampadaker Pratibedan', (Thakurnagar, 02-11-2009), p.3.
- ¹³³ *Matua Matobad o Sree Sree Hari-Guru-Chand Thakur*, (Shyamnagar, 2008), p. 17
- ¹³⁴ *Matua Mahasangher Sanghidhan*, pp. 4-5; 'Matua Mahasangher 23tama Barshik Sammelan', pp. 14-16
- ¹³⁵ However, as the General Secretary of the MM admits, this is an approximate number, as they do not have proper membership records. Interview with Ganapati Biswas, General Secretary, MM, Thakurnagar, 10/01/10.
- ¹³⁶ The male literacy rate among the Namasudras is 80.58 per cent and female literacy rate is 62.76 per cent. Census of India 2001, cited in Santosh Rana and Kumar Rana, *Paschimbange Dalit o Adibasi*, Kolkata: CAMP, 2009, pp.21, 25.
- ¹³⁷ See their website: <http://namasudra.com>
- ¹³⁸ For evidence of this high caste bhadrak control of political power in West Bengal, see Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, 'The Resilient Bhadrak: A Profile of the West Bengal MLAs', in C. Jaffrelot and S.Kumar (eds), *Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of the Indian Legislative Assemblies*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2009.
- ¹³⁹ The philosophy and politics of the MM have been discussed in detail in Bandyopadhyay, 'Postscript', in *Caste, Protest and Identity*, pp. 265-73

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